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ABSTRACT

State leaders have been raising their state's academic standards and creating high-stakes tests that involve incentives and penalties for students and schools in their efforts to raise student achievement. The ability of local school boards to lead student-achievement policy in their communities depends upon how well they can use their state's system of standards and assessments, analyze local issues in student achievement, and make decisions that result in improvement. One aim of this publication is to help school board members strengthen their understanding and ability to deal with standards and assessments as they make decisions about raising student achievement in their school districts. Another board responsibility involves defining student achievement as it relates to the school community's vision of what it means to be an educated and competent person. Therefore, a second aim of this book is to explore key factors involved in defining student achievement. A third aim is to show policymakers how vision setting, standards, and assessment are related and flow from one to the other. This book provides readers with a broad range of factors to consider in reaching their own conclusions about what student achievement means in their community. (Contains 72 references.) (RT)

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MICHAEL A. RESNICK

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Foreword

Empowering America's children with an education that prepares them and our nation for success in the 21st century is the public's top domestic priority.

Local school systems are rising to the challenge to provide education programs that meet future needs—and promote high levels of academic achievement. As local policy makers, school boards have a crucial leadership role to play in determining the success and direction of their system's education program.

Forward-looking school boards are asking themselves two key sets of questions that are at the heart of student achievement. First, what does it really mean to be a well-educated student in the Information Age? How does our community define achievement in terms of developing a student's academic knowledge, habits of mind, character, values, and interests? Second, as policy makers, what do we need to know about using standards and assessments as tools for educating students? How can we most effectively use those tools to produce the student achievement results we envision?

The Educated Student: Defining and Advancing Student Achievement will help school boards answer those questions. In succinct language, this unique publication presents key ideas from education's best thinkers and examines future trends and other factors influencing education today. It presents recent policy developments in the areas of standards and assessment through a jargon-free discussion of the basic concepts needed for effective decision making. The goals of *The Educated Student* are to offer school board members a wide-angle lens through which to view student achievement, to suggest the right questions to bring to their policy deliberations, and to provide a working knowledge that will inspire dynamic board leadership to raise student achievement.

Anne L. Bryant
Executive Director
National School Boards Association

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Additionally, Sally Banks Zakariya, NSBA director of publications, provided oversight for the production of the publication, including final edits.

Introduction

Across the nation, the call to raise student achievement is loud and urgent. Business leaders, politicians, and the general public believe that America's students are not as proficient as they need to be to compete and succeed in the 21st century. In response, state leaders, with substantial public support, have been raising their state's academic standards and creating high-stakes tests that involve incentives and penalties for students and school systems alike. These developments, along with the enactment of President George W. Bush's education plan in 2002, are changing school system priorities, instructional decisions, and the very way local educators think about education.

The ability of local school boards to be student achievement policy leaders in their communities will depend on how well they can use their state's system of standards and assessments, analyze local issues in student achievement, and make decisions that result in improvement. School boards that do not develop a working knowledge in these areas run the risk of becoming marginalized or even irrelevant as education policy makers. Hence, one aim of this publication is to help school board members strengthen their understanding and their ability

to deal with standards and assessments and, ultimately, to make decisions that will raise student achievement in their school districts.

A Board's Responsibility

As important as it is for school boards to know how to use standards and assessments in dealing with student achievement, however, they have a yet more fundamental responsibility. If local self-governance is to mean anything, then local school boards and their communities must be able to define student achievement for themselves. After all, state standards and assessments reflect priorities and goals in student achievement that others have designed. In most cases, these state standards are only a beginning point. They do not cover everything Americans would call for in a fully educated student.

School boards could embrace the attainment of state standards as their school system's sole mission and focus their own role on implementation. But a successful education cannot be equated solely with attaining certain test scores in specific subjects. Does the function of schools embrace other elements, which, taken together, better reflect the community's vision of an educated or competent person? When school boards simply accept a set of standards without first answering the question, What does student achievement mean in our community? they may miss the opportunity to match their school program with the aspirations they and their constituents have for their children.

In effect, the failure to define student achievement places process before purpose. It assigns the design of delivery systems to goals that may not be understood by or have the commitment of those who are responsible for implementing them locally. Therefore, a second aim of this publication is to explore key factors that should be considered in defining student achievement.

Definition Plus Implementation

Because defining student achievement involves people's values, their educational philosophy, and their view of contemporary life and the future, the vision of what constitutes an educated person should be determined at the level closest to the people—the local community. As local school boards and communities seek to define student achievement, there will likely be heated debates over the goals of education

and the means of providing it. For example, is the goal to achieve results on specific tests, to prepare for college or career, or to attain a broader and more basic set of goals about one's quality of life, lifestyle, and civic sense? Viewed this way, any discussion of student achievement is likely to involve larger questions about the purposes of education; the role of schools, families, and other institutions; and the selection of priorities.

For a local vision of student achievement to have any meaning, however, it must be connected to an implementation process. In this regard, a school district's definition of student achievement should be the foundation upon which its standards are built, and, in turn, fundamental to the way the district measures progress and holds itself accountable. In working through a well-conceived process, both school districts and communities can develop a clear sense of purpose for what their schools are doing. That vision of student achievement can then become the district's driving force—served, but not controlled, by standardized tests, which too often have become the focus of what students and teachers do when they come to school every day.

The National School Boards Association (NSBA) has established a program called the Key Work of School Boards—an eight-step process embracing vision setting, standards, and assessment—as a means by which school boards can provide policy leadership to raise student achievement in their communities. The chapters of this publication are organized to provide school board members and community leaders with the core substantive knowledge needed to implement the Key Work process or similar student achievement governance models developed by state school boards associations or local districts. In addition to providing content knowledge on student achievement issues, then, the third aim of this publication is to show policy makers how vision setting, standards, and assessment are related and flow from one to the other.

In sum, this publication is not intended to present a specific definition of student achievement. Rather, the material provides readers with a broad range of factors to consider in reaching their own conclusions about what student achievement means in their community. Among those factors are what their schools and classrooms will need to look like and how boards can use standards and assessments to make policy decisions to help them reach their goals.

CHAPTER ONE

Student Achievement
Creating a Definition

In 21st-century America, there is no public function more important than the education of our children, no questions more crucial than why we do it, how we do it, and how well the job gets done. Those questions will resonate all the more powerfully as the Information Age continues to unfold and knowledge, along with the ability to use it, increasingly becomes our nation's most-valued asset. Consequently, the focus and quality of our schools will substantially determine whether our children succeed individually and as a nation.

While all levels of government and all sectors of our economy have a role to play in determining and raising student achievement, education is, nonetheless, primarily a local responsibility. It is, after all, at the local level where the children are and where the services are provided. Further, it is at the local level where parents place their trust every day in a neighborhood public school to provide their children with the education that was promised them. Viewed from this perspective, the exercise of community self-governance in determining what our children learn is as important today as ever. This is not to say that rigorous state standards are misplaced; only that they are just one piece of the student

achievement puzzle. More precisely, state standards can help school districts ensure that their educational program is academically sound, measurable, and accountable for what all students should know in core academic subjects. However, such standards are no substitute for identifying and fulfilling the broader meaning that citizens assign to education; to the overall development of their children; or to the other goals, activities, and measures of performance they wish to have incorporated into the neighborhood schools their children attend.

Creating a Vision of Education

If local school boards and their communities truly want to determine the education their children receive, they need to have a vision of what student achievement means to them; they need to develop a plan to get there; and they need to dedicate themselves to the ongoing implementation and improvement of that plan.

The importance of creating a vision cannot be underestimated, because it establishes a sense of a school district's purpose—an overarching goal—upon which all else is built. One place to start is simply to ask, What will successful students in our school system look like? What should they know? What should they be able to do? What values, moral attributes, and outlook should they possess?

Although most vision statements are fairly broad, they are typically built on specific goals expressed by parents, local educators, and others in the community, which, taken together, provide a foundation for the school program. Do we want all children to go to college, to know a foreign language, to have habits and values formed around democratic ideals or teamwork, to have a lifelong appreciation for the arts, good health, or nature?

Once a vision for student achievement is created, a second question needs to be asked: What kind of school system and community can provide the environment needed for our children to succeed? What should be the dynamics in the classroom? What should our teachers know and be able to do? What should they expect of students? What kinds of resources should be available? Operating within this visionary framework, the school system can establish an education program, including expectations of what should be learned at each grade level

and in specific subjects, that will fit into the larger vision of who we want our students to be.

Building a Common Understanding

Vision setting can be an exciting and enlightening process. It can place on the table new directions and viewpoints about the aspirations and expectations of the school system's constituents (i.e., customers). It can also be a challenging process to find the right words to define student achievement, especially in communities where there are decidedly diverse points of view.

To be effective, vision setting must be a shared process; that is, in order to build common understanding and support among parents, school staff, and the public for the vision and the plan that supports it, as much of the community and the school staff should be involved in developing the plan as possible.

Where does engaging the community and school system to define student achievement leave the role of the school board? The answer, very simply, is that it leaves the board at the center of the process. Because most school board members—about 96 percent—are elected officials, they have a mandate to lead their communities through the vision-setting process. As public leaders, they have the contacts and the credibility to bring all constituents together, including parents, business leaders, and civic groups. At the same time, because school boards govern the school system, they are in a position to ensure that the community's vision becomes real within the school system, including providing the resources and accountability needed to meet their student achievement goals.

Because engaging the community around vision setting and the development of a student achievement plan is a highly public process, considerable thought and planning need to be taken to ensure that the many benefits are garnered and the pitfalls are avoided. School board members can consult many excellent publications, including NSBA's *Communities Count* (which describes the process of public engagement) and its companion publication, *Community Connection* (which identifies a broad range of community-involvement success stories). School board members might also wish to refer to NSBA's Key Work of School Boards Web site at *http://www.nsba.org/keywork*.

A school system can define student achievement by identifying priority subject areas and the specific measures of performance that students should attain. It can then develop an implementation plan to align curriculum, resources, and the accountability systems that support that goal.

However, if the vision-setting process starts by focusing on specific programs, it runs the risk of confusing the means of education with its ends, thereby potentially missing important ingredients that should go into a definition of student achievement. Rather, by asking such questions as, What is the broader aim of education and the function of our public schools? school boards are more likely to develop a vision that includes the whole child rather than a categorical list of subjects or skills.

A Focus on the Whole Child

Over the years, many philosophers and scholars have grappled with the issues such questions pose. To help orient readers to the need for a broad view of education, it might be helpful to examine briefly what several of these thinkers have to say about the aims of education. However, in considering these ideas, the basic mission of schools to provide a rigorous academic education should not be lost. (That mission is the focus of Chapters Three and Four.) Instead, the purpose is to determine whether there are undercurrents that will give richer meaning to the term "student achievement."

Philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, for example, eloquently defined the aim of education as guiding students "toward a comprehension of life." In *Democracy and Education*, America's foremost education philosopher, John Dewey, described education as the means by which students define their society and their interaction with it, as well as the way society renews itself and ensures its continuity. These modern thinkers echoed the classical vision of education set forth in Plato's *Republic*. Socrates saw the aim of education as emphasizing both the gymnasium (physical skills) and the muses (philosophy and the arts) in order to develop children who do not simply possess a collection of abilities, but are well-integrated and balanced individuals in their personal lives and as contributors to a civil society.

In his work *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, 17th-century philosopher John Locke looked at education from the standpoint of the qualities that parents would want their children to have. He explored four themes: virtue (acting in an ethical or moral manner); wisdom (managing one's life so that the individual and the community prosper); breeding (handling oneself socially); and learning (acquiring academic knowledge). A century later, French thinker Jean Jacques Rousseau echoed Plato's and Locke's focus on the whole child in his work *Emile*. Rousseau's vision of learning extended beyond book knowledge to what the 12-year-old Emile knew from experience, his judgment, and what he understood and could do. For Rousseau, education developed a moral, social, and free person who was able to take action in the real world. With compelling simplicity, Rousseau concluded: "People sometimes speak about a complete man. Let us think rather of a complete child."

In *The Disciplined Mind*, Harvard University psychologist Howard Gardner revisits some of the same issues for 20th- and 21st-century readers. He defines education as embracing three realms: truth (knowledge of academic content), beauty (enjoyment of the arts), and morality (the use of information for good or socially wise purposes). By adding beauty and morality, Gardner addresses the development of the student's wisdom, emotional maturity, and overall humanity—embracing what Plato called soul. In sum, Gardner suggests that children must "master certain areas of knowledge, acquire certain values, and master certain skills" as well as "develop intellectually, morally, soundly, emotionally, and civilly."

Gardner's work as a whole also argues that schools need to recognize and value not just linguistic and logical intelligence but intrapersonal knowledge (knowing oneself), interpersonal skills (dealing with others), and the ability to pose questions about life, among other so-called multiple intelligences. For Gardner, these areas interact and reinforce each other to form the whole person.

The most recent of these authors strongly believe that education centers on rigorous academic study. However, they clearly have a larger concern for developing the habits of mind students need in order to use their knowledge in a way that leads to the betterment of their personal lives and of the civil society to which they belong.

Powerful Thinking

As for academic study, these scholars also offer interesting insights into the mental skills that might become part of a school district's definition of student achievement. For Dewey, for example, "[T]he end of education is not the base reception or storage of information, but the formation of personal powers of attention, memory, observation, and generalization." Similarly, Whitehead believes that the aim of schooling is not necessarily to "pour more information into the student's mind"—students will forget such things in the long run—but in "the acquisition of the art of the utilization of knowledge." He saw the intensive study of core academic subjects working together to develop language, abstract thinking, reasoning, observation, imagination, curiosity, foresight, and approaches to discovery and world events, among other mental skills. Likewise, for Whitehead, student achievement would mean not only acquiring these skills for use in specific subjects, but having the ability to use both skills and content knowledge in real-life situations.

Gardner sums up this broader aspect of student achievement in *The Disciplined Mind* by calling into play the "so-called higher cognitive functions, problem-solving, problem-finding, planning, reflecting, creative, and deeper understanding, [as well as the] capacity to think about one's own mind." Looking perhaps more to the means of student achievement than to the definition, Gardner also emphasizes the importance of recognizing the roles a student's personality, emotions, and motivation play in achieving desired outcomes.

Democracy, Happiness, and Real-World Learning

Three other aspects of education that merit special consideration in defining student achievement are also prominent in the work of these thinkers and others, but these aspects can be easily overlooked—especially in the current environment in which state standards and testing have driven decisions about local education policy.

First, just as students need to cultivate certain bodies of knowledge and character attributes for individual success, they also need to acquire certain information and values to ensure that our nation as a whole will succeed. In *The End of Education*, educator Neil Postman points out that as America, a nation of immigrants, becomes even more

diverse, schools must play a strong role in unifying the nation and fostering patriotic commitment. He states that the narratives of our nation—the stories about our country and its history—need to be told to children in ways that link history, heroes, and principles to create pride among young people and help them identify with the nation and its ideals. For Postman, public schools should be places that foster knowledge and commitment to American culture and democracy—not simply places that increase economic productivity.

The work of educator E.D. Hirsch Jr. also connects education to the inculcation of national identity and values. Hirsch's best-known work, *Cultural Literacy*, argues that there is a body of cultural knowledge that defines our nation and that all students must be familiar with if they and the nation are to thrive.

However, in *Principles of Social Reconstruction*, English philosopher Bertrand Russell cautioned that schools should not become a "political weapon" for the "maintenance of the existing order." Russell would inject "free inquiry" into the teaching of social tenets that others might prefer students accept as articles of faith. For Russell, a goal in student achievement would be to develop independent thinkers and truth seekers who can recognize the difference between ideals and reality in thinking about national values and patriotism.

Second, these thinkers generally agree that children should be happy in their school experience and develop into adults who have a positive outlook on life, though some would urge the need to balance the goal of happiness with a recognition that learning requires hard work, discipline, and challenge. Aristotle provides a different perspective, which also bears directly on the purpose of education and the definition of student achievement. He viewed the attainment of happiness as driving the choices people make, which, in turn, reflect the habits and attitudes they develop in their youth. For Aristotle, a successful education is measured not simply by what students know, but, ultimately, by the nature and quality of what they do (the way they conduct their professional and personal lives, for example). The objective is twofold: First, education prepares students to enjoy life through their willingness and ability to engage in meaningful activity; second, in doing so, it develops habits and attitudes that enable students to make sound ethical decisions about their actions.

To Aristotle and other classical thinkers, the realm of ethics traditionally has encompassed issues of personal integrity and social conduct. In today's increasingly scientific and technical world, however, contemporary ethicists would also put special emphasis on issues concerning the biology of human life, management of the environment, and the consequences of globalization, including such as overpopulation, immigration, and international conflict.

Finally, a number of these philosophers and educators also emphasize that there are many other desirable behaviors, attitudes, or ways of interacting that should be learned in childhood and therefore incorporated into the meaning of student achievement. There are also certain instructional approaches that clearly support those behaviors. Progressive educators believe that effective academic learning requires more than classroom lectures and book study and that students must experience what they learn. (Dewey calls this learning by doing.) If the objective is to enable students to use information creatively, to produce certain kinds of work, or to think in a particular way, then students should have the opportunity to learn from practicing those applications.

Likewise, teaching children to function effectively in a democratic society, to perform in teams, or to be leaders requires the development of habits and practices that cannot come from academic study alone. In their recent book, *Developing Democratic Character in the Young*, Roger Soder, John Goodlad, and Timothy McMannon note that students should not simply learn about democracy; rather, through experience and practice, they should develop a "democratic character." That is, they should learn to understand and to live in a world based on democratic decision making, egalitarianism, and fair play. To do so requires not just study but also seeing, practicing, and valuing such attributes through careful planning in day-to-day classroom activities.

Looking Ahead

As school leaders develop their definition of student achievement, they need to be forward looking. Rather than developing a vision and, ultimately, a school program that seek to perfect life in the past, they should be guided by their judgment of what students will need to succeed in the future. In *Total Leaders*, authors Charles Schwahn and

William Spady sum this up when they speak of visionary leadership as "defining and pursuing a preferred future."

Children born in 2003 will graduate from high school in 2020. Given the revolutionary changes occurring in the Information Age, school board members may wish to consider several broad societal trends that will affect the world today's children will encounter as high school graduates. Some of these trends will influence the subject matter covered in the curriculum; others will influence the skills, attitudes, and judgment young adults will need in a fast-changing world. The challenge is not simply to identify these trends, but to determine how they are tied to the school board's vision of student achievement and how the school system will deal with them.

The following paragraphs speak to a workplace in which employees at all levels will need to be more entrepreneurial. They also discuss a world of scientific discoveries that offers young parents options in "designing" their babies, an economy that will significantly increase leisure time, and an expansion of racial and cultural diversity that will reshape American society. With fields of study expanding and reaching deeper levels, especially in science and technology, the common knowledge that all students will need to have and know how to use effectively is dynamic and changing. By keeping an eye on future trends, school boards can determine the extent to which their definition of student achievement will need to reach beyond performance on state assessments to address the emerging choices and demands of American life. Among the trends to consider:

Changes in the Workplace

Over the past 20 years, millions of full-time jobs have been eliminated from the manufacturing sector as a result of technological advances and the outsourcing of work. The service industries, which were able to absorb some of the impact, typically at lower pay levels for the majority of workers, have undergone similar downsizing in recent years.

As a result, students whose educational level and outlook were previously suited for employment as clerks, bookkeepers, and retail salespeople are less likely to find such jobs in the future. Today, even college graduates cannot count on securing careers in middle

management—technology has eliminated many positions, along with the administrators that previously supported them.

As the 21st century unfolds, employment relationships and the kinds of jobs available continue to shift, as evidenced by the drumbeat of announcements by major corporations laying off thousands of workers at a time. In his 1995 book *The End of Work*, futurist Jeremy Rifkin chronicles how work has changed in the past and how technology and the information age will "re-engineer" work, including the kinds of skills and attitudes that will be needed in the future.

But it is not only the kinds of jobs in the workplace that are changing. It is the speed with which new jobs are becoming obsolete. Most workers can expect to change not just their jobs but their careers several times during their lifetime. Unlike those who joined the workforce a generation ago, today's students must be prepared academically and attitudinally to thrive in a world of multiple careers, some of which have not even been invented yet.

Beyond multiple careers, the continuing shift away from manufacturing jobs and certain service industries—especially better-paying jobs—is also affecting the working style of U.S. employees. For example, a generation ago, frontline workers operated under the directives of their managers; today, they are expected to be more-independent decision makers and problem solvers. Our emerging information society places a premium on the resourcefulness and speed with which workers acquire and use information, especially compared to their competitors. Information workers are being called upon to shift from project to project; to work with people they do not know and will never meet; and to translate information across unrelated fields to produce results.

Although there already is an increasing demand for workers in fields like science and technology, the great bulk of the Information Age workforce will not be directly involved in those fields. Nevertheless, these workers will need to be able to access, understand, and translate the information high-level experts have developed into ideas, services, or products in their workplace.

Finally, information workers are being asked to think of themselves not so much as employees but as entrepreneurs in the way they use information and manage their careers. In *Global Trends 2005*, Michael

Mazarr agrees with Rifkin and others that changes in the content of work, how work is done, attitudes about employment, and characteristics of good employees (such as the ability to take independent responsibility) combine to make for a different kind of worker than was common a generation ago.

What does all this mean for schools? It means that students should not be prepared for specific jobs or careers as much as for lifelong learning. Beyond learning academic subjects, students are likely to need classroom experience that encourages creative and independent thinking, inspires the strategic use of information to solve problems and produce projects, and develops team-building and networking skills. That is, while academic learning focuses on the acquisition of subject matter, the fuller measure of student achievement for the workplace would appear to embrace a much broader range of knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

The Role of Technology

While the precise nature of technological change is hard to predict, rapid developments are bound to occur that will affect every phase of American life. Some basic technological literacy is needed for success not only in the workplace, but in one's personal life as a consumer and a participant in leisure enjoyment. If a high school graduate cannot succeed in the workplace due to the lack of basic technological skills, how likely is that failure to inhibit success in the other aspects of life that also rely on technology?

In considering the relationship between technological competency and student achievement, school board members should ask: As in the case of academic skills, is there a level of proficiency in technology that all students must possess?

In addition to preparing students for an increasingly knowledge-driven and technologically driven society, school leaders also need to consider how best to approach technology as an educational tool. Within the school setting, policy decisions will need to be made that will involve such factors as (1) the access to technology each student needs to foster student achievement; (2) the skills needed to use technology in a way that supports the school district's student achievement goals; and (3) the acquisition of up-to-date research to support sound

education and budgetary decisions about the educational use of technology. On the latter point, local educators need to know how the use of technology affects students and the learning process, how to effectively integrate technology into teaching and learning, and how to identify the best products (especially software) to get the job done.

Given the increasingly important role technology is likely to play in the workplace and throughout American culture, and given the role of technology as a tool to support student achievement, questions of equity are bound to arise. Specifically, if there is a disparity in access between the haves and the have-nots, the student achievement gap—and, ultimately, the success gap—is likely to widen along socioeconomic lines.

Inequities in access to technology extend beyond the difference between rich schools and poor schools. For example, the availability of technology at home can bear directly on the information available to students, the nature and quality of the projects they learn to produce, and the supplemental learning opportunities available to them.

Finally, beyond its educational use in the classroom, educators may also wish to consider the many ways technology is changing how society functions, especially in terms of communications, use of leisure time, and commercial transactions. What does this mean for the district's goals to develop the whole child? What kind of information do students need about the technological world? What dangers should they be aware of in regard to the Internet or computer games? What efforts should be taken to guard against student passivity or isolation from overuse of computers?

Science and Ethics

Scientific and technological discoveries that can enrich and extend our lives are being made every day, but many of these discoveries call into play judgments that should not be left to the scientists alone. In *High Tech/High Touch*, social forecaster John Naisbitt explores the profound decisions that ordinary citizens will be making as individuals and as a body politic in the field of human biology. As soon as 2020, for example, it is likely that technology will be available to enable expectant parents to make decisions about the genetic makeup of their children. Meanwhile, decisions may be made to allow human cloning

and other alternative means of human reproduction to create an entire new life, replace body parts, or provide opportunities for human experimentation.

Likewise, developments in medicine are likely to offer a broad array of drugs and devices to enhance individual mental and physical performance. Pharmaceuticals, prostheses, or electrical implants may be available to boost specific aspects of brain performance, and once these products are introduced, success in select activities may not be possible without their use.

Naisbitt leads one to conclude that the scientific discoveries on the horizon can profoundly influence how we define human life, family life, and American society. Yet ethical considerations, including public consensus on these matters, are lagging behind the discoveries. Today's students will be called upon collectively and in their personal lives to make judgments about the use of such advances, including decisions about the physical and mental characteristics of their own children.

Alongside the ethical decisions that advances in science and technology can pose, developments in these areas are likely to present other decisions that can profoundly define our values and way of life. For example, the breaking of the genome code already has triggered debate about the use of that information to determine eligibility for health insurance and certain types of employment. Down the road, the genome code could even determine the kind of education individuals receive or are encouraged to receive. Decisions about the genome code and the use of technology could also redefine the meaning of one's sense of privacy and individuality in our society.

Scientific discoveries in other fields will give rise to equally significant ethical decisions with equally significant implications for the future. For example, the advance of science and technology may raise questions about preserving the environment, the depletion of energy resources, our ability to make war, and the extent to which our nation will help meet the economic and health needs of undeveloped regions.

As school boards think about student achievement, they should ask, to what extent should students spend class time trying to understand the ethical direction their future world might take and the choices they will have as individuals, parents, and citizens? Are such considerations the

role of the public schools, or are they best left to families, religious institutions, and the media?

Demographics

The 2000 U.S. Census confirms that the United States is increasingly becoming a more racially diverse society. Currently, 71.4 percent of our population is white, 12.2 percent is African-American, 11.8 percent Hispanic, and 4.6 percent Asian or other. By 2020, high school graduates will be entering a society where those numbers are projected to be 63.8 percent, 12.8 percent, 17 percent, and 6.5 percent, respectively. Today, nearly 10 percent of our total population is foreign-born, including 62 percent of our Asian population and 35 percent of our Hispanic population. By 2020, 12 percent of the people in the United States will have been born in other countries.

Within the public school setting, the numbers are even more dramatic. In the 1999–2000 school year, minority students accounted for nearly 37 percent of the total school enrollment. Specifically, African-American students accounted for 17.2 percent of U.S. schoolchildren; Hispanic students, 15.6 percent; and others, 4 percent.

These demographic trends result from a combination of factors that are likely to continue, including a disproportionately larger share of women of child-bearing age among minority populations, different cultural attitudes toward family size, and a liberal U.S. immigration policy.

These trends play out differently in different states and localities. For example, California is a majority-minority student enrollment state, and Florida, New York, and Texas are projected to follow by 2010. In many other states, however, racial diversity may not appear to be a significant issue at first glance, and even in highly diverse states or school districts, these demographic trends may appear to be confined to specific communities or neighborhoods due to housing patterns.

Nonetheless, there are a number of factors that school boards may wish to consider, even in racially homogenous districts. First, as America becomes more diverse, the nation can celebrate and benefit from multiculturalism. But we must also recognize that children from minority populations frequently are encumbered by limitations

imposed by poverty and language. And though these children have a rich culture of their own, some may lack an awareness of the culture and values that make up a broader American society. This threatens to limit not simply their success but the success of the nation as whole.

Ensuring the educational success of minority populations in a nation in which such children compose 37 percent of enrollment is a matter of individual opportunity and economic necessity to the country as a whole. In addressing the expanding racial diversification of America, the school's focus may not be simply on providing bilingual or remedial programs for at-risk minority or limited-English speaking students. School boards may also wish to consider fostering a cultural awareness that will prepare all students for life in a multiracial and culturally diverse society. As the numbers suggest, the isolated enclaves in which different groups worked and lived a generation ago are likely to give way to more racial interaction among workers and consumers as well as to a general population featuring greater geographic and economic mobility.

The numbers also suggest the potential for greater political friction between racial groups as minority groups elect a greater share of public officials and accumulate a stronger economic and social base. Observers in the field already identify Social Security as a potential battleground, as an aging population will result in a disproportionately minority work force paying taxes to support retirees who are disproportionately white.

While schools cannot resolve all future political and social challenges, real choices will clearly have to be made about how racial groups live with each other, and those choices can be influenced by the attitudes and experiences that are developed during a child's school years.

Globalization

To a great extent, the trend toward globalization embraces most of the other trends discussed here but extends their influence to the world stage.

Globalization means that more economic opportunities will exist for Americans to do business in other countries, both as professionals and as consumers. Indeed, globalization will likely lead to a growing global

business culture and perhaps a common standard for communication among people whose only contact may be via e-mail. Where fast-moving information is the commodity, words must have the same meaning to everyone, regardless of native language or culture. But even in a standardized business world, with a common, dominant language, success also means that participants must have an awareness of the culture of foreign markets and the people who are their partners and competitors.

"Something more fundamental is at stake here than mere trade," Mazarr observes in *Global Trends 2005*. Developments in world trade will involve today's students in future economic and political decisions that may redefine U.S. sovereignty vis-à-vis other nations, the quasi-governmental activities of multinational corporations, and immigration policy. Larger strategies around such issues as the environment, natural resources, world-population levels, and investments in other nations could also be involved. Americans will need to make sophisticated judgments about who they are as a nation and a culture and where the country might set intangible national boundaries on such matters as international currency, international judicial bodies, or treaties governing how business is conducted in individual nations. To a great degree, these judgments will call upon a combined knowledge of history, government, economics, geography, and other subjects to deal with decisions our nation did not have to make before.

Globalization also means that what happens in other countries will become more important to all Americans and require a greater global awareness. In a shrinking world, the challenges are not just economic; they may be cultural or political as well, as evidenced by the destruction of the World Trade Center. Sociologist Anthony Giddens brings the point home by defining globalization as "the intensification of worldwide social events which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring miles away and vice-versa."

Clearly, the school curriculum cannot accommodate all of the potential issues associated with globalization. But at what level, if any, should students be made aware of the personal opportunities and national challenges that trends in globalization might pose for them?

Leisure Time and Lifestyles

Within education circles, much of the focus is on aligning student achievement with the demands of the workplace. Understandably, in an information-driven economy, a highly educated workforce is essential to enable the whole of society to function. Yet preparation for the rest of life is also important.

In *The End of Work*, Rifkin says several trends are emerging that suggest "the rest of life" is going to become a more important part of the American scene. Our nation is working longer hours today than 20 years ago, but technological advances carry the promise of reducing the time we spend at work. These advances can involve specific technologies that will save workers time, such as telecommuting and videoconferencing. But they are also likely to involve intelligent machines, which will mean workers will need fewer hours to do their jobs. Likewise, technology can alleviate the time needed to meet personal responsibilities such as shopping, via e-commerce, or housework, with the help of robotics.

In addition to the expansion of leisure time, more lifestyle options are likely to be available, as well as more mass communication about those options. Finally, as Americans live longer and more-vigorous lives, people are apt to place greater value on how they spend their time during those extended years.

One might argue that preparing students to use their free time is not a responsibility of the schools. But if it is a legitimate aim of formal education to enhance the quality of life, then exposing students to avocations and skills such as music, art, sports, and political and civic involvement should be viewed as a part of the curriculum—part of the school district's vision for student achievement.

Summing Things Up

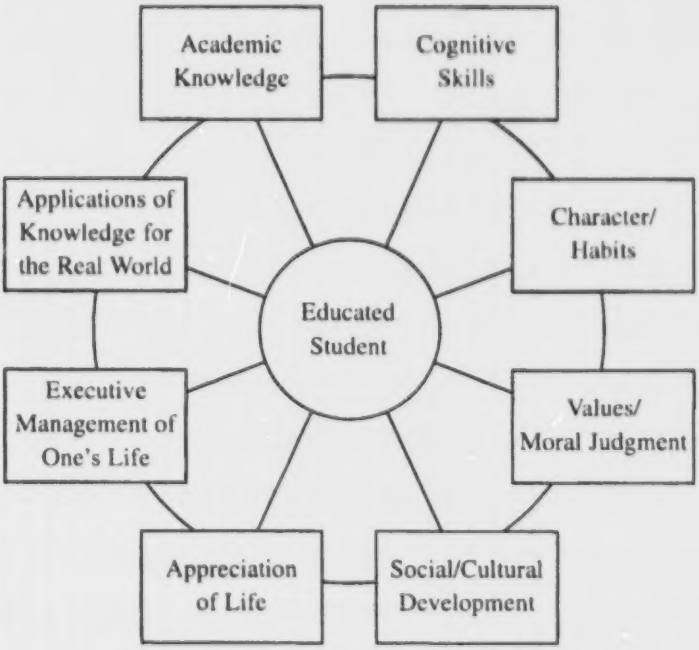
Considering how modern and classical thinkers alike have defined education, and considering the changes our society is facing today, it is clear that the aim of education can be substantially broader than performance on tests or preparation for work. Philosophers and educators offer a vision of student achievement that involves developing a student's overall competence and personal style and giving the child the opportunity to be a complete and self-fulfilled person in society.

Judgment, wisdom, creative thinking, ethics, values, social skills, self-refection, national identity, leadership, teamwork, positive attitudes, and special talents all join with academic knowledge in defining what an educated student is and what that student should achieve at school.

Future trends—such as changes in the workplace, technological developments, ethical considerations, demographics, globalization, and emerging lifestyles—also factor into our vision of the educated student and what student achievement means.

Taken together, these considerations, within the framework of a strong academic program, can put school boards on the road to a powerful definition of student achievement.

What Does an Educated Student Mean in Your School District?



KEY QUESTIONS

Educating the Whole Child

- What does it mean to be an educated student in our community? How do we know?
- What are the life goals our community has for its children? Who do we want our children to be, and how do we want them to live their lives?
- What subject areas should students master? What thinking skills should they possess? What personal characteristics and values should they have?
- What does our school district need to look like to ensure that our vision of student achievement will be successfully implemented?
- How well is our vision of student achievement and the kind of school system we need being communicated to the public, to school employees, and to students?

The Role of the School Board

- How do we go about engaging our constituents to determine how they define an educated student or student achievement?
- Are there aspects of student achievement on which the community, the school board, or the school system have different views or aspirations? If so, which should we follow and why?
- Does our school board have a shared definition of what an educated student is or what student achievement means?
- How well does the quality and scope of our school program meet our definition? How do we know?
- Does our school system set standards, acquire classroom resources, and judge progress based on our vision? To what extent is our vision ignored or compromised by the "realities" of operating our school system?

Future Trends

- Are there societal trends, such as changes in the workplace, technological developments, ethical considerations, demographics, or globalization that will influence our vision of the educated student

or what student achievement means? If so, how will the school staff members obtain the information they need to address these issues?

- What kinds of knowledge, skills, and character attributes will students need in the future?
- Are there local factors, such as changes in our community's demographics, culture, values, or business sector that need to be considered?
- Do we look to any of the above factors as influencing our vision of student achievement? Are they a means to an end, or both?
- In defining student achievement, should we let the future take care of itself and focus solely on the core academic requirements as our definition of student achievement?

CHAPTER TWO

Special Issues in Defining Student Achievement

As a practical matter, what will defining student achievement mean for the role of the school board and the operation of the school system as a whole? First and foremost, the school board will have a clear and unified goal upon which to make key policy decisions about what students are expected to learn. The board can then align the resources that will be needed, determine how progress and accountability will be measured, and develop strategies for continuous improvement. By having a common definition for achievement, the school board, school employees, parents, and the student themselves will know where they want to go and be more likely to exert themselves in a unified way to get there.

In this chapter, we focus on additional factors that may influence the way school boards think about student achievement and how they implement that vision. Among the factors boards need to consider are federal and state expectations for achievement, the growing importance of school readiness programs, the need to link students with developments in the real world, and the option to partner with private

providers. All of these factors can affect what a school board's vision of achievement looks like in practice.

This chapter also examines the ideological debate between traditional and progressive education that plays so prominent a role in influencing how political leaders and professional educators approach and judge student achievement. Finally, this chapter provides a transition for translating a school board's definition of student achievement into the operational framework discussed in the following chapters on standards and assessment.

Closing the Proficiency Gap

Fifty years ago, only half the civilian workforce graduated from high school. In historical terms, and compared to other nations, the current school completion rate of nearly 90 percent is a world-leading success story. But at a time when economic opportunity and access to the benefits of society are based on completing high school and beyond, that isn't good enough. Moreover, for too many students, possessing a high school diploma or GED does not mean they have the knowledge or skills they need to succeed.

Yet schools and school districts have been able to report that they are meeting their student achievement goals because most of their students do succeed. Recent state reforms reject this tacit acceptance that some students will not or cannot make the grade. As a result, many school districts are undergoing an attitudinal and programmatic sea change in their approach to educating lower-performing students.

These state reforms were reinforced by federal policy in 2002 when President George W. Bush signed his program—which carries the name No Child Left Behind—into law. Specifically, while school districts can continue to set the bar as high as they choose for students who would ordinarily exceed state standards, they will be held accountable for students who do not reach those goals. Hence, regardless of its college acceptance rate, Advance Placement enrollments, or other apparent measures of achievement, a school or school system will be viewed as legally failing if a portion of its students do not meet state standards. For example, under the new federal law, the allowable failure rate set by the state in math and reading/language arts for grades

three through eight must be reduced each year (or group of years) by an equal percentage until it reaches zero in 2014.

At the very least, then, a school district's definition of student achievement will mean that all students will be academically proficient as defined by the state. Therefore, as school boards consider how these new requirements fit into their definition of student achievement, their vision of school system operations may also change. For example, teachers may need to raise their expectations for academically weak students and instill higher self-expectations in them. The best teachers may need to be assigned to the weakest schools, along with a significant commitment of additional resources. Clearly, local educators will have to plan now if their most educationally challenged students are to meet the same state standards that are set for all students.

In addition, school boards may also seek to close the achievement gap between their highest- and lowest-performing students and schools. As boards consider that related but different goal, they should take care not to discourage efforts to raise achievement levels among better students simply to narrow the achievement gap. Likewise, school systems should take care not to report success in closing the achievement gap on the basis of inadequate advances among their better students.

The Growing Importance of School Readiness

In defining student achievement, local leaders are apt to think about what a high school graduate should know and be able to do. For professional educators, developing a program to meet that definition involves putting together a progressive set of academic building blocks from grade level to grade level. Hence, whether students succeed will depend on how well prepared they are for the next step. In this regard, a student's first step—entry into school—may be one of the most important, yet one of the most overlooked, steps in raising student achievement.

The National Research Council (NRC) summed it up this way in its report *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*: "What happens during the first months and years in life matters a lot ... because it sets either a sturdy or fragile stage for what follows." The NRC's report deals broadly with a variety of social,

emotional, health, and other factors that can influence the overall well-being of young children and their development.

Although attention to these factors may seem far removed in years and function from the responsibilities of the classroom, school boards may want to consider the kinds of community preschool programs they should support, especially for disadvantaged students. Simply stated, the stage that is built in the preschool years can significantly influence whether individual students—and, in turn, the school district—will attain a community's vision of student achievement.

Children who enter school with the ability to recognize numbers and letters, who possess certain social and self-discipline skills, and who have a developed vocabulary and have been read to are better prepared to acquire language and number skills than children who haven't had such preparation. As children learn, they acquire a foundation of knowledge and a frame of reference from which to learn more. Those who come to school without certain skills and knowledge of the world around them are more likely to progress slowly, fall behind, and be on the wrong side of a widening achievement gap. There is ample evidence that children who are not reading at grade level by the third grade are more vulnerable to repeating grades, falling further behind in courses that are based on reading, and ultimately dropping out of school.

As school boards consider what their schools must look like to ensure that all students can achieve, they often appropriately focus on special reading programs at the earliest grade levels. However, their strategy also should include thinking outside of the K-12 box by focusing on preschool readiness. Children are likely to learn better and faster if they are given developmentally appropriate opportunities to acquire the knowledge and skills they need early in life, rather than trying to play catch up through compensatory programming in school. Often, too, this catch-up programming comes after the ideal time when children are developmentally ready to learn such skills and when their peers are progressing at a faster rate, leaving them even further behind.

Consequently, just as school systems need a vision of what student achievement means when students graduate, they should have a vision for what achievement means when children first enter school. By so doing, they can establish a basis for working with Head Start and other

preschool providers in their communities, as well as with parents, to ensure that young children are being exposed to a curriculum that will enable them to come to school ready to learn. School systems may also wish to consider whether they want to operate their own preschool programs or programs that recognize parents as their child's first teacher.

For the most part, school districts will be charting their own course as they consider developing standards or expectations for what preschoolers should be able to do. *Quality Counts 2002*, an *Education Week*/Pew Charitable Trusts report on the condition of early education across the nation, found that only 15 states and the District of Columbia had specific standards for prekindergarten programs and that only five more states had such standards in the works.

Another concern in approaching student-achievement strategies for preschool and the early grades is when computer technology should be introduced, how it should be used, and what young children will be expected to be able to do with it. Proponents of introducing computers at early ages cite the machines' entertainment value and their ability to motivate children to learn. Computer programs can help young elementary school children write stories and think in logical steps. The National Association for the Education of Young Children has found that, if used appropriately, technology can enhance the cognitive and social abilities of 3- to 8-year-olds. Further, the Education Commission of the States (ECS) reports that software programs used in schools in Chicago and Newport News, Va., have raised phonetic awareness (that is, awareness of language sounds) among 4- and 5-year-olds. In addition, ECS reports, a study of schools in North Carolina by the Bank Street College of Education shows that working together on computers enhances the social experience of young children.

On the other hand, the Alliance for Childhood, in its publication *Fool's Gold*, raises concerns that exposure to computers at too young an age can create attention problems, stifle creativity, and inhibit the development of social skills. Further, the alliance says, such exposure prevents children from using their whole bodies to experience learning—an important part of their development. While the research is not conclusive regarding the best age to introduce children to computers, some experts, such as psychologist Jane Healy, caution against their use before age 7. Ultimately, the effectiveness of technology as a learn-

ing tool will depend on such factors as the quality of the software used, how well teachers understand the educational use of computers, and the amount of exposure students have to the machines.

Keeping Up with the World around Them

In defining student achievement and the kind of environment needed to support it, education academicians frequently overlook three important and related points.

First, knowledge is becoming wider in scope and deeper in content. Given the acceleration in discovery and change, current areas of knowledge are likely to become more dispersed and to be found in what sociologist Geoff Mulgan refers to as the "distributive knowledge" of the community rather than through a central source.

While this is especially true in scientific disciplines, it also applies to other areas where access to the Internet can provide great quantities of sometimes contradictory information on a subject, compared to the more controlled academic environment of just a few years ago. Knowledge of these new developments is not always necessary to the basic curriculum, especially in the early grades. At times, however, these new developments provide students with evolving information about a field of study that cannot be found in textbooks—or in the awareness of most teachers. (For example, recent discoveries could enhance a high school science class but not be pertinent to a third-grade class or an English literature class.) New developments also may involve social values and personal attitudes that will help prepare students for a fast-changing environment. Local educators may ask how connected, aware, and smart do our students need to be about the world around them to meet our definition of an educated student?

If up-to-date learning is important, how can classroom teachers, who spend their entire day in school, stay abreast of developments and acquire the best information to teach them? If this aspect of learning counts, what vision of a school or classroom can fulfill the objective? Here the school board may wish to consider its community engagement and technology strategies to bring in the voluntary assistance of businesses, universities, libraries, and museums where the developments are taking place or can be organized to expand student knowledge.

This raises the second point, relevance. In seeking higher levels of achievement, discussions around the school board table are likely to involve higher standards, better teachers, less "down time" during the school day, and perhaps increasing pressure on students to perform. Does raising student achievement also entail sparking students' interest because they see the value of what they learn in terms of its utility or purpose in their current lives? After studying some 20,000 high school students, researcher Laurence Steinberg concluded that they were largely disengaged from their schoolwork. To a great extent, Steinberg reported in his 1996 book *Beyond the Classroom*, these students did not see the relevance of their academic work to the larger world, including the workplace. In the Information Age, the concept of work has become more abstract and more reliant on thinking skills than was the case a generation ago. As school districts consider their student achievement strategies, they may again turn to the larger community, especially local businesses, to provide meaning and excitement around schoolwork.

This takes us to the third point, motivation. Regardless of the rigor of the standards or the quality of teaching, students will only learn to their full potential if they are motivated to do so. From the student's perspective, seeing the relevance of school to the larger world can help. To inspire students, some educators point to a different range of motivating factors, such as raising the price of failure (through a "no pass, no play" policy for athletes, for example) or rewarding students for success. Other educators view these factors as too limited in their effect or as sending a negative message about the intrinsic value of learning. They might prefer to motivate students by making the act of learning more fun or the presentation of the subject matter more engaging. This approach also has its critics, who argue that too much play around subject matter can waste time and detract from disciplined learning.

Clearly, student motivation counts, although approaches may differ and coexist. But how often is motivation discussed in addressing the vision of what high-achieving students and supportive classrooms should look like? School board members may wish to consider how important factors like relevance and motivation are to student achievement. If these factors are viewed as important, school boards need to ask, What do our schools and classrooms need to look like? What kind

of resources do we need? How can we engage parents and the community at large?

Partnering with the Private Sector

In efforts to raise student achievement, or to reach goals and priorities that differ from the traditional public school program, there has been increased interest in offering more choices in education, including involving the private sector in providing education services within the public school system. As school boards discuss their definition of student achievement, they may want to consider whether, in serving their community, they may need to offer more than one set of goals and several instructional options. And they might also ask whether partnerships with the private sector might support better quality programming than the school system can provide alone. While a full discussion of public school choice, charter schools, and private-sector options is beyond the immediate scope of this publication, their relationship to student achievement should be brought into the discussion for both the opportunities and liabilities such options present.

A fairly substantial segment of the American public believes that the increased involvement of the private sector in education will produce beneficial results. For some that belief extends to converting public school funds into private school vouchers. The premise of this approach is that private sector choices and competition will pressure public schools to increase student achievement. For others, privatization means that public schools should hire private firms to run all or some of the school program (after-school or summer programs, for example) if the arrangement increases student achievement.

The pressures for privatization in whatever form are likely to continue for several reasons. First, American tastes in general support choice, customization, and change when systems or institutions do not provide some people what they want. Second, the development of state testing and reporting on specific subjects enables the private sector to treat education as a measurable and standardized commodity that "teaching companies" can more easily market on a statewide or national basis. And third, efficiencies in technology make the $400 billion a year K–12 market a more attractive place to do business.

Technology has also had a particular impact on the rise of home schooling. The current debate on student achievement and the availability of online course material and teacher services have contributed to the growth of cyberschools. In states such as Pennsylvania, networks of cyberschools for home schoolers have been formed that qualify as charter schools, thus enabling the costs to be paid at public expense. Societal trends, such as increased telecommuting, combined with parental concerns over time spent on school buses or the condition of old school buildings, may add to the attraction of home schooling or the creation of yet other private concepts.

In addition, such factors as the need for new school construction, the shortage of qualified teachers, and increased cultural diversity also can influence the way parents, taxpayers, and politicians think about privatization. Whether school boards are combating privatization proposals that can undermine public schools (such as vouchers or non-district-sponsored charters), or inviting the private sector into the system, the challenge is to focus on the meaning of student achievement. If school districts are not clear what student achievement means, they risk allowing private providers and vendors to define it in ways that meet their corporate market niche, whether it is to provide school alternatives or to determine programming within the public schools themselves.

In defining student achievement, the purposes of education, and the role of the public schools, most school board members and their communities would probably agree that education or a specific course should be more than a commodity whose supplier is determined by how well it can get children to perform on a test. For example, most local educators would be likely to want their programs to develop character and values (such as patriotism, civic responsibility, or egalitarianism) as well as produce happy children.

Once school systems are clear about what they want, private companies that can meet their requirements may be an attractive option in running particular schools, teaching specific courses, or providing tutorial and supplemental services. While school boards are not likely to support charter cyberschools or home schooling in general, they may find instances where partial home-based or off-site arrangements operating under the aegis of the school district can raise student achievement over what school-based instruction alone can provide.

Traditional or Progressive?

As school board members look to political leaders and prominent educators for guidance in defining student achievement and what counts in educating students, they will come to realize that there are sharp disagreements. Some of these disagreements collect around two larger philosophies of education that have been at the root of a 100-year debate in American education. Hence, while most issues, such as standardized testing, the back-to-basics movement, or nongraded courses should be viewed on their own merits, school board members need to recognize the larger philosophical context from which policy makers and the public frequently form their judgments and values about student achievement and how best to attain it.

On the one hand is the traditional view, which places a strong emphasis on a common core curriculum for all students. Its proponents will tend to be comfortable with students memorizing course material (so as to develop an academic foundation), taking standardized tests (so as to meet specific standards), and learning through a teacher-centered approach to instruction (so as to adapt themselves to the manner of instruction that is presented). Proponents of this school of thought also tend to favor phonics over whole language as a basis for teaching reading, and English immersion over bilingual education as a means of transitioning non-English-speaking students to English.

In recent years, E.D. Hirsch Jr., a professor at the University of Virginia, has been one of the most prominent educators associated with this approach. His most well-known work, *Cultural Literacy*, posits the existence of a body of cultural knowledge that is taken for granted among educated people and that enables them to communicate regardless of their geography, ethnicity, or age. For Hirsch, knowledge of that common culture is necessary for individual success and the success of the nation. Knowledge of our culture is necessary for young children to learn to read well and learn what they are reading about, he says, because that knowledge gives meaning to words. For children whose exposure to the broader American culture is limited, the issue in reading isn't just whether they can sound out words, but whether they have the background to attach meaning to those words. As the base of knowledge on which these children build more knowledge fails to match that of their peers, the achievement gap can widen. Hirsch is

especially concerned that if children from low-income backgrounds begin their school careers without an adequate breadth of cultural literacy, they will immediately fall behind. In addition to specific elements of culture, Hirsch advocates a common core curriculum for all children—especially in a country as mobile and diverse as ours.

Another proponent of a traditional approach to education is former Secretary of Education William J. Bennett, who promoted a model called James Madison High School, in which all students study a traditional and narrow range of academic courses with rigorous standards. Generally, this approach rejects programs or policies that would result in "dumbing down" the curriculum in the name of student self-esteem or enabling students to take courses, like vocational education courses, which some traditionalists say don't prepare them intellectually to succeed in American society. Traditional educators also tend to embrace the work of noted education historian Diane Ravitch, who emphasizes centralized standards for core subjects as a way to provide greater coherence, focus, and quality control on student learning. While traditionalists support local decision making in some areas, in the case of standards they reject the more localized approach that allows individual schools or classroom teachers to "do their own thing."

Traditional educators frequently point to other nations where students score higher on international tests than their American counterparts. In part, they attribute that success to a more centralized curriculum and a more structured learning environment. In the traditional view, accommodations for individual student interests, multiculturalism, and differences in student learning styles should not compromise the core curriculum.

The other side of the philosophical debate belongs to the progressive educators who take a student-centered approach to education. Unlike their traditional counterparts, they place less emphasis on memorization, especially drill and practice. Instead, they are comfortable with giving children more flexibility to learn at their own pace, to select what they want to learn, and to commit more time to activities that involve learning by doing rather than straight bookwork. To the progressives, education should be responsive to the individual talents and learning styles of students and should develop a student's habits of character, attitudes, outlook, and applications of knowledge that are not necessarily

found in academic subject matter. The foundation of progressive education is rooted in the work of philosopher John Dewey. Currently, Alfie Kohn is among the leading proponents of progressive education. In his book *The Schools Our Children Deserve*, Kohn argues against the classroom as a place where teachers lecture students, who, in turn, passively listen and memorize the information dispensed. Kohn also criticizes the current focus on grades, homework, discipline, and competition as standing in the way of the atmosphere needed for true learning.

Kohn is especially critical of standardized testing, particularly for lower-achieving students, as he believes such testing will narrow the scope of education and promote drill-and-practice activities rather than more expansive thinking about subject matter and interaction between academic areas. Further, he believes that testing will motivate students toward short-term memorization and test-taking strategies rather than true understanding of the subject matter.

Progressive educators tend to be more interested in presenting themes and assigning projects that move across or integrate diverse subject areas. They are also more inclined to promote self-esteem, instruction in thinking skills, and collaborative learning in their teaching styles. They contend that the benefits of such approaches outweigh the stronger focus on subject content that traditionalists advocate.

In sum, progressive educators picture a classroom where teachers facilitate activity, challenge students, promote peer interaction, and allow time for the unstructured exploration of information. For them a student-centered environment will motivate children to acquire knowledge for its own sake rather than to score well or to compete with others.

Traditional and progressive education can present different visions of the scope and emphasis of schooling and different visions of what a classroom should look like. But despite such differences, these two viewpoints do not have to produce mutually exclusive strategies in the classroom. The two approaches can be blended, as educators discovered in the case of the so-called reading wars, which inappropriately pitted phonics (emphasis on learning word sounds) and whole language (emphasis on stimulating interest in reading) against each other. On the basis of evolving research, practitioner groups such as the International Reading Association advocate multiple approaches to reading instruction to "create the appropriate balance of methods

needed by each child." In a recent report, the National Reading Panel of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development endorsed this research-based approach, which is also supported by the Learning First Alliance, a consortium of 12 prominent national education organizations.

Currently, America's schools of education tip toward the progressive approach. The current standards and assessments movement, on the other hand, reveals that the political will in state capitals is moving in a more traditional direction. However, while state leaders have increased the focus on core knowledge and test performance, they generally are not telling local educators to use particular educational approaches to achieve the desired results. Nor do state legislators say they are trying to create a particular atmosphere in the schools—although the central theme that test scores count is causing classroom change toward a more traditional approach.

In evaluating specific proposals, school board members are encouraged to recognize their own philosophical biases, as well as the biases of others who take positions on the content and methods of instruction. The question should not be whether a proposal is labeled traditional or progressive. The more important policy question is how well a proposal serves the district's vision of what it means to be an educated student in the community, as evidenced by research and data. Such questions take school boards to the center of defining student achievement.

KEY QUESTIONS

Closing the Gap

- Should our definition of student achievement envision that all students will succeed to a given level of proficiency?
- Does the culture of our school system and our allocation of resources support our goals to raise the achievement of lower-performing students?
- Is our primary goal to ensure that all students are proficient, is it to close the gap between higher- and lower-performing students, or is it both?

School Readiness

- Do we have a vision or standards for what it means to come to school ready to learn?
- Do we have preschool policies, partnerships, or programs to support our goal that all children will come to school ready to learn?
- Does our vision of student achievement place a priority on all children reading at grade level by the third grade?

Relevance and Motivation

- To what extent is attaining our vision of achievement dependent on the relevance of subject matter to students or their motivation to learn?
- Should we look to businesses, universities, and other entities to bring the distributive knowledge of the community into the school curriculum?
- If the above factors count, what do our schools and classrooms need to look like?
- Is there a particular approach or combination of approaches that should be emphasized or de-emphasized in motivating students?
- What kind of programs and community engagement activities do we need?

Partnering with the Private Sector

- What factors or trends exist in our school system and community that might make the services of private providers an attractive option as a part of the public school program?
- Have we considered how private education providers could be used within the public school program to attain our student achievement goals?
- Do our state policy makers know what approaches to privatization, if any, support our student achievement goals, including the kind of protections and flexibility we may need in operating programs? Do they know which approaches are inappropriate or counterproductive and why?

Traditional vs. Progressive Education

- Should our school system encourage a traditional or progressive approach to education in specific areas of instruction?
- When we make decisions about specific education policies, do we first determine whether the proposed policy meets our vision of student achievement?
- Do we make decisions based on data-driven research, or do we rely on a general philosophy? When we rely on research studies and opinion leaders, do we know whether they operate from a broader philosophical bias?

CHAPTER THREE

The Building Blocks
State and Local Standards

Once a school district is clear about what student achievement means, it can then determine the programming that will be needed to achieve its objectives. The successful translation of a school district's vision into concrete programs substantially boils down to the quality of its student achievement plan, starting with the standards it adopts. Indeed, a school district's academic standards should be viewed as the essential building blocks that give meaning and direction to its definition of student achievement.

A well-thought-out set of standards is a statement of what students are expected to know and do as a result of being enrolled in the school system. It also serves as a means of strategically coordinating academic development from grade level to grade level and across related academic subjects. When standards are properly designed, they can guide educators to connect resources (such as teachers, curriculum, course material, and staff development) with the learning objectives that are being sought. Likewise, when standards are reinforced by an assessment and accountability system that is based on them, the district can

influence how vigorously teachers and students will work toward their attainment.

As policy makers, school board members should know what standards are, how standards can be used to fulfill the district's student achievement mission, and what questions to ask the experts in the district about the quality and rigor of the system's own standards. This chapter will examine the basic principles behind standards and the evolution of the state standards movement that is currently influencing classroom practice across the nation. It will also reassert the role local school boards have to play in the standards-setting process—a role that goes beyond the standards that states have set.

A discussion of education standards may seem a little daunting at first—especially since the field contains some specialized terminology. The purpose of the following section is to demystify the discussion by focusing on the main concepts school boards and the community need to consider in approaching standards in their school systems.

What Is a Standard?

In the general marketplace, a standard describes a universally recognized feature that makes a product or service acceptable or usable. For example, tire manufacturers may vary aspects of their product, but must conform to specific dimensions that automobile manufacturers agree will be the standard size needed to fit their cars. Likewise, a standard may describe specific performance levels or ingredients that a product or service must possess to be acceptable and reliable among consumers. Hence, while architects may be creative in their building designs, their drawings are expected to include certain specifications relating to construction and structural soundness. Those who provide a service might also be held to a minimum standard of knowledge or performance as a condition for working in their field, as measured by some certification or licensing process. Finally, while a standard can be presented as a basic or minimum level of acceptability, it also can be a model for a product or level of performance that must be precisely or closely replicated.

Beyond serving the interests of industry, standards are frequently developed and enforced by public agencies to serve a larger public purpose. That public purpose typically involves public safety; consumer

protection, information, or confidence in a product; or the promotion of competition between the makers of products or services, including providing consumers with a common basis of product comparisons from which they can make rational choices.

It is easy to see how commonplace and useful standards are in our society and why the general public—including business people—would value having state or national standards in education. Clearly, it can be said that common standards in education can serve students, parents, and the business community in their capacities as consumers of education, just as standards serve other sectors of our economy.

Similarly, given the concern that not all school districts are providing an adequate education, and that academic expectations among and even within school districts are not consistent, why shouldn't there be a common understanding about what constitutes proficiency in a subject or what a high school graduate should know or be able to do? Why shouldn't we expect substantial pressure to centralize standards in education at the state or even national level?

As school boards think about what a standard in education is and should be designed to do, they should also consider what a standard should not be or do. For example, standards should help schoolchildren derive the benefits of an education of reliable quality wherever it is provided. However, it is also important to avoid a level of centralized standard setting that produces a cookie-cutter approach to schooling and stifles the educational interests or priorities of individual students or communities.

When a school district adopts standards in specific subjects, it is essentially creating a model of essential knowledge and performance levels for all students. Additionally, standards can be strategically used as a basis for aligning resources, comparing performance across districts, providing accountability, and identifying successes to learn from and failures to improve upon.

Education standards are designed to answer two questions: What do students need to know? How well do they need to know it? Additionally, one can ask, What resources are needed to get the job done?

Content standards

Descriptions of what students need to learn are referred to as content standards. In addition to knowledge of the subject matter, content standards also describe the skills in thinking and applying information that the student should possess. For example, in third-grade math, content standards might include memorizing multiplication tables, solving multiplication problems, and adding and subtracting simple fractions in word problems.

In establishing standards, states and local school systems frequently use benchmarks at various intervals to further clarify the knowledge or skills being sought and to check progress. For example, one of a school district's reading standards may be that "the student understands the meaning of what is read," including, among other factors, the analysis, interpretation, and synthesis of information. At different grade levels the accomplishment of this standard will mean different things. At the fifth-grade level, the benchmark of success may be that the student can "synthesize information on one topic from several sources."

Performance standards

A determination of how well students must learn the material or execute the skill is referred to as a performance standard. Performance standards set the bar to determine how good is good enough. Performance is measured by a specific test or some other means that is designed to provide evidence of a student's knowledge or skills, such as an essay or a project. Typically, a performance standard involves demonstrating a level or span of knowledge or skill that is needed to earn a particular grade. For example, to be successful, a student might be required to achieve a grade of 70 percent on a particular examination or consistently demonstrate mastery of certain skills.

Opportunity-to-learn and service-delivery standards

What resources and support will students need if they are to learn certain content at specific levels? The quality of resources needed are called opportunity-to-learn or service-delivery standards. For example, if a standard calls for students to know specific areas of chemistry or to use grammar effectively, then teachers would be expected to have a level of mastery of the subject matter and pedagogical skills to teach at

that level. For low-achieving students to reach the standard expected of them, opportunity-to-learn standards may describe the kind of auxiliary services needed to meet their specialized needs (for example, qualified reading tutors, health services, or adequate nutrition).

Note, however, that some political leaders and policy experts do not recognize service-delivery standards—or at least the infusion of more money in these areas—as a necessity for raising student achievement. For them, rigorous content standards and assessments, real consequences for success and failure, and the proper alignment of current resources will do the job.

How to Recognize Well-Designed Standards

The mere fact that states or school districts have adopted written standards does not mean they have adopted good standards. In an article for the Brookings Institute's *Education Policy 2001*, Chester Finn and Marci Kanstoroom put the challenge succinctly: "Good standards get both form and content right." Therefore, for standards to be effective, they should be developed with several goals and characteristics in mind:

Standards should be specific and clear.

This step is vital. Standards that are vague may not give teachers an adequate indication of what a student needs to know or be able to do. For example, a writing standard that simply says "students will be able to express themselves" will offer little guidance. By contrast, a standard that says "students will write coherent compositions with a clear focus, adequate detail, and well-developed paragraphs" and is accompanied by examples of the work to be done is both clear and specific. Not surprisingly, vague standards may lead both teachers and students to believe that higher levels of achievement are being reached than is actually the case.

Additionally, where high-stakes standardized tests are used, vague standards are more likely to encourage teachers to teach to the test (and to teach to test taking) rather than use the standards to determine the knowledge and skills that students are taught. That is, when standards are not well thought out, teachers may be inclined to use the test as the standards and the basis for what they do in the classroom.

On the other hand, when standards are too detailed, they can generate legitimate complaints from teachers that the curriculum and overall classroom environment are becoming too constrained to inspire effective learning. Additionally, too much specificity may produce more standards than students can manage or attain.

One caution is in order: When school districts replace vague standards with measures that are clear and specific, they are also likely to identify previously undetected deficiencies in student achievement. And while this step can be a valuable development in raising student achievement, it can also cause a public backlash if the community believes students are working harder to attain seemingly lower performance levels, especially during the first transition year or two. Boards shouldn't underestimate the potential for backlash, especially if there are consequences attached to low performance, such as students being retained or denied promotion or teachers losing pay raises or other advancements.

Therefore, even when the community has developed a common vision for raising student achievement, the school system should work with parents, the media, and other stakeholders to prepare for possible negative reactions to the implementation of new standards (and assessments) that have greater specificity or rigor than previous practice.

Standards should be rigorous and support in-depth learning.

Standards should be designed with an eye on both what students should know and what thinking skills they should be expected to acquire as they learn the subject matter. Not surprisingly, the two are connected to each other. That is, when standards are set at a depth that will enable students to know enough about the subject matter, they are also more likely to provide students with enough information to engage their analytical, reasoning, problem-solving, and other higher-order thinking skills. When that occurs, student interest in learning the subject matter is more likely to increase beyond simple memorization or recitation of facts.

For example, students will need to memorize enough about the Colonial period to know the history of the times. And by acquiring that in-depth knowledge of the facts, students should then be able to think about the meaning of social events and about why certain decisions

were made; they should also be able to draw reasonable comparisons to other periods. These results will be less likely to occur if standards only require students to learn a cursory amount of information or only emphasize factual memorization.

At the same time, the scope of the standards should be sufficiently comprehensive to provide students with a clear understanding about what the subject is about, including the larger principles and organization that give the specifics greater meaning and relevance. However, if the content that students must cover is too broad, they may not have adequate time to learn the subject matter deeply enough or well enough to engage the higher-level skills needed to truly understand it.

While the validity of international test comparisons is subject to debate, studies of international achievement in math and science have revealed some remarkable disparities between how the United States and higher-performing countries approached curriculum design. For example, the total curriculum for all subjects and grade levels in Japan covered 450 pages; in the United States, in comparison, the standards in each of several individual course areas covered hundreds of pages. As a result, in Japanese schools, students were exposed to a focused and more thorough treatment of subject matter at each grade level than students in U.S. schools were. Schools in the United States, on the other hand, covered a broader range of subject matter—hence, the criticism that the U.S. curriculum was a mile wide and an inch deep. Even when the subject matter was repeated at different grade levels, it was not covered at a depth or focus needed to provide the higher levels of student achievement attained by students in Japan.

Academic standards should be expressed as student outcomes and be measurable.

Generally, standards and their underlying benchmarks should be expressed in terms of what students are expected to understand or be able to do. For example, in the area of language usage, outcome-oriented standards would be exemplified by phrases such as the student will be able to "interpret" or "analyze." At each grade level, specific benchmarks of success would give further definition of the performance expected.

By contrast, a standard that is simply expressed as either a curriculum offering ("the student will be exposed to works of classical litera-

ture") or as attitudes or feelings (the student will "appreciate" or be "confident") doesn't adequately express an academic standard.

Once a school system determines the student outcomes it wants, it can then determine how it will measure whether students are achieving the standard. For that reason, the standard should be designed in a manner that can be measured, including enabling fair comparisons between students, schools, and school districts. However, standards do not need to be limited to those outcomes that can only be measured by multiple-choice tests. For example, a student's ability to demonstrate analytical skills through essays or projects can be measured if teachers are given instruction in common criteria to include in evaluating each student's work.

Standards should be concise and usable by parents and teachers.

Clearly, when it comes to meeting a school district's vision of student achievement, the effective development and use of standards can play a key role, provided those standards are in language that is clear, concise, and usable. It should be self-evident that teachers are less likely to pay attention to standards or translate them into classroom learning if the standards lack precision or are too cumbersome to use.

Likewise, if parents are overwhelmed by the technical terminology and length of, say, third-grade reading standards, they won't be able to use the standards to gauge how well their children are doing and determine what they can be doing at home to help them succeed. Consequently, school systems are developing programs to educate parents about standards, thereby enabling them to understand and support the district's student achievement goals as their child progresses from grade to grade. For example, in 1999, the Seattle school system provided parents with the district's standards and benchmarks in reading, writing, communications, and mathematics. At the same time, teachers were given a guidebook that identified the instructional resources as well as classroom, district, and state assessments that would be used to support and measure progress for each benchmark.

To determine whether parents understand the standards and know how to use them, a school board may want to participate in school district workshops for that purpose. Additionally, board members may want

to review a sampling of their district's standards to determine whether the meaning of those standards is clear to them as nonprofessionals.

Standards should provide common understanding of achievement from classroom to classroom.

When a state or school district sets standards, it is saying that from school to school and from classroom to classroom, regardless of any socioeconomic challenges, there will be a clear level of achievement that each child will attain. Without common standards, different teachers may have different ideas about what students should know and what level of achievement they should attain. The result can have a cumulative negative effect over a period of years.

For example, a classroom of fourth-graders may have been exposed to different levels of knowledge, course emphasis, or skills in using the information provided by the school's six third-grade teachers in the previous year. In the absence of common third-grade standards, the fourth-grade teacher may find herself repeating course material for some students. Meanwhile, the same material may be difficult for other students who were not previously exposed to the knowledge or skills upon which it is based. The problem can become more profound as students move from grade to grade over several years. By contrast, schoolwide standards can provide a common enough foundation in the subject matter to diminish these classroom inefficiencies substantially. Likewise, in school systems where students move frequently from school to school and where teachers in the same grade level are unlikely to confer with one another, district and state standards will help provide academic continuity.

At the same time, the adoption of common standards should not be confused with creating a school system in which, for example, all fourth-grade students are doing the same thing at the same time. Teachers should have flexibility in selecting the curriculum and instructional methodology that will best motivate and meet the needs of their students to attain the standards.

The process of setting standards should be viewed as a moving target.

Once standards are set, they should be reviewed regularly to ensure that changing conditions are met, including changes in the commu-

nity's concept of student achievement. However, when significant changes to standards are being contemplated, it may be wise to phase in the changes, rather than make them all at once, to ensure greater acceptance and success during the transition. For example, districts may wish to raise their standards in increments to avoid high failure rates for certain schools or specific categories of students on standardized tests during the first year or two. Alternatively, to avoid setting artificially low standards, districts may wish to adopt high standards immediately but gradually increase the percentage of students who must achieve a passing score.

At the state level, Virginia and Texas adopted new standards but took different approaches toward school accountability, with very different results. Virginia developed its rigorous Standards of Learning and immediately began testing students at high levels, with the result that nearly all schools (97 percent) were identified as failing. Although the consequences for poor performance would not be phased in for several years, the impact of low scores in the first year created a severe public backlash against the program. By contrast, when Texas established its Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), it too recognized that it would be several years before students in many of its schools would reach those standards. While Texas immediately held schools accountable, it decided to raise the percentage of students who would need to meet the standards gradually. It also raised the rigor of its standards in stages. As a result, the TAAS program escaped unnecessary controversy and enjoyed more support from the public.

A Historical Perspective: The State Standards Movement

During the 1990s, the states substantially increased the quality and rigor of their own standards. Coupled with the introduction of high-stakes testing and accountability measures that carry real consequences for school districts and students, many states have aggressively defined academic achievement, or at least have determined what would count in the classrooms in their state. Not surprisingly, if most school districts do not totally equate state standards and accountability with student achievement, attaining those standards has at least become the focal point of their education program.

Understanding the general context in which the current state standards movement has evolved will provide school board members with a wider perspective on the role state and local policy makers play in standards setting.

A traditionally local function

Traditionally, the adoption of standards in American education has been a local responsibility. In some school districts, individual teachers over the years developed a personal sense of what students in their classes needed to know and the level of proficiency they should attain. Although they operated individually, classroom teachers were not totally on their own. Common textbooks and teacher guides developed by the publishers influenced them, as did discussions with colleagues, participation in professional development programs, materials from professional associations, and the research studies that were available to them. In setting standards, teachers and administrators have also been influenced by the feedback received from various assessments, especially the standardized tests their district or their state selected.

Today, setting standards in many school districts has become much more deliberate, involving curriculum specialists, site-management teams that develop consistency and coordination of standards within schools, and formal, districtwide standards-setting processes.

High achievement for all students

Despite these efforts, disappointing student performance on various national and international assessments convinced many policy makers as early as the 1970s that a primarily localized approach to standards setting was too haphazard to support desired statewide (or national) levels of achievement in the core academic subjects. In too many districts, standards were viewed as not high enough or not necessarily matched against a universal set of expectations of what students should know and be able to do as they moved from grade to grade in specific subjects.

Initially, many states responded by developing what, in effect, were minimum standards and, in some cases, minimum competency tests. Following the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, it was clear that state standards and local practice were still not adequate. State standards were viewed as too low, poorly crafted, and not influential at the

local level. In her book *National Standards in American Education*, Diane Ravitch provides an insightful analysis and history of education standards in the United States through the mid-1990s. She advances a thoughtful case for national standards and assessments as a means of raising student achievement to levels of international competitiveness.

Since 1990, the movement for more rigorous state standards has received substantial support from the nation's governors and business leaders, three U.S. presidents, and legislators on Capitol Hill, who have tied standards to federal funding. As a result, state standards have been revamped and now substantially preempt local efforts in the areas of language arts, mathematics, history, and science. Currently, 49 states have adopted new standards in English and math, and many are also developing standards in history and the sciences. As state standards and high-stakes testing grow in prominence, teacher colleges, professional development programs, and textbook selection criteria are likely to become much more closely aligned to the standards.

In recent years, the state standards movement has been aimed at the dual goals of raising standards for all students while closing the achievement gap between the highest and lowest achievers. Although school districts support these goals, accomplishing them may require some educators to significantly depart from their past practices and attitudes, especially in their beliefs and approach toward lower-achieving students. Many school systems have functioned as a sorting process: At one end of the performance spectrum, it was expected that some children would excel and gain admission to competitive universities. At the other end of the scale, it was equally expected that other students would barely meet—or fail to meet—minimum competency standards. Operating with the bell curve in mind, these districts considered mediocrity or even failure for some students acceptable in assessing whether the district had met its student achievement goals. That is, a school or school district could consider itself a success even though a portion of the student body lacked basic academic proficiency. The state standards movement is intended to change that approach by saying that *all* students are expected to reach a level of proficiency needed to succeed in life. In short, the states are defining student achievement (and accountability for it) in ways that are chang-

ing some basic assumptions about our expectations of students and about a school district's responsibility for attaining academic results.

To meet that change, as discussed in Chapter Two, some school districts will need to allocate resources differently, investing more money in the weakest schools and assigning the best teachers to those schools. Perhaps more important, the school district and community may have to pursue a cultural change in attitudes and beliefs. They may have to reconsider what constitutes school or district success and revise their attitudes and commitment toward lower-achieving students. At the same time, they will have to be vigilant to ensure that the pursuit of state standards does not result in diminishing the level of instruction for those students who can easily perform at the level those standards require.

Although most observers will agree that state standards have improved, they are still not of such quality as to be free from criticism—or, more important, from the necessity for local school districts to seek to improve or build upon them. One criticism has been that standards are too often developed by academicians and require mastery of more information than students can meaningfully learn or need to learn about specific subject matter. Likewise, in an area such as history, efforts to develop state or national standards have drawn criticism for seeking to be all things to all people; promoting questionable social or political agendas; or omitting the study of social principles, events, or cultures of particular importance to specific groups or localities.

Several organizations, such as the American Federation of Teachers, the Council for Basic Education, and the Fordham Foundation, have rated state standards. And while these groups differ in the criteria they use, they agree that, for the most part, state standards still have not attained the quality and rigor needed for a world-class education.

Holding school districts accountable

As states have moved to improve their standards, they also have acted aggressively to ensure that school districts will meet them. For many states, such activities include testing students in an expanding number of subject areas and grade levels, as well as requiring exit exams as a condition for their graduation. While assessing progress in meeting standards is important, states are going further to make sure

that school districts are remedying persistently weak results. Most states have turned to reporting and imposing specific interventions. For example, according to the *Education Week* report *Quality Counts 2002*, in the 2001-02 school year, 43 states issued report cards; 17 of them required information on a disaggregated basis (by school or by race or gender), and 20 required that school report cards be sent home. Further, 20 states authorized consequences for failing schools, such as intervening to reconstitute or close schools or permitting student transfers.

On top of what states have been doing on their own, the enactment of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act amendments provides a national framework by which states must maintain a system of standards, annual testing, reporting, and accountability (consequences) for select grades in math and language arts as a condition for receiving federal funds.

Local school boards will have to stay current with their state system, especially as new provisions are phased in to meet their state's timetable—including the requirements of federal law. Although this chapter and the next (on assessments) should provide school boards with a working context to address the state role, they are encouraged to place that core function within their larger responsibility to govern on the basis of the full range of standards that are needed to meet their vision of student achievement.

In sum, the current state-based standards reform movement is the latest in a decades-long series of state reforms. As such, the current state standards system does not represent how American education has always been, nor is it a static process. Rather, it is a serious—and a publicly and politically popular—response to contemporary needs for higher academic achievement. But state-based reforms are not flawless in terms of their technical efficacy or their capacity to meet local aspirations or changing conditions. Just as state standards have filled voids local standards have created, they, too, contain voids that school districts may now need to address.

The Local Role

Clearly, given this history, state-based reforms should serve as a point of departure for most school districts—not as a point of termina-

tion for considering what student achievement means for the children of their community.

The following paragraphs highlight some of the broader policy issues that school boards and superintendents can discuss to ensure that their school district's approach to standards not only fills in where the state has left blanks but is in sync with their community's aspirations for student achievement.

Do our school district's standards make the grade?

School districts should determine whether their current standards are adequate to educate students at the level they envision. They should also determine whether their standards are designed in a way that clearly identifies the kind of classroom instruction and resources that will be needed.

To form a context for their review process, school districts can evaluate and develop their standards by drawing comparisons with those of other states and school systems. To facilitate this process, several Web sites compare or evaluate individual state standards by subject and grade level. (See "Sources of Information about Standards," page 57.)

For school board members, a relatively short time spent on these Web sites can go a long way to strengthen their understanding of standards and to inform their policy discussions about the standards used in their own district.

Are state standards our 'core' or our 'all'?

After reviewing their state's standards (and their own standards) in basic academic areas, local school officials can then determine whether to build upon them. For example, they may decide to amend their standards to elevate the level of content knowledge that students should possess or to increase the emphasis that should be placed on higher-order thinking skills. It should be noted that state standards may be designed primarily to emphasize those skills that can be measured on standardized tests. Hence, school districts may need to ask whether state standards adequately treat such skills as the student's ability to make judgments about information or to use information creatively.

To go beyond state performance standards, school districts can simply raise the scores that students or schools must attain on standardized

tests. However, districts need to set the bar at a level that will be challenging on the one hand but realistic for their children to attain on the other. Even the most affluent and well-educated communities may not find it reasonable to expect that all students will be able to perform at the uppermost levels of achievement (such as in the top 1 to 5 percent).

Likewise, districts may want to add components to the school curriculum that reflect local values or culture. For example, a community with a strong ethnic heritage or a rich contribution to a period of history may incorporate localized subject matter into the curriculum to develop the skills required by their standards. A largely Hispanic community, for example, may have students read Hispanic authors to develop specific reading skills. Or a community might add knowledge of how local history reflected the times as a substantive standard for a social studies course.

Such additions to the program can increase students' interest and their engagement in their schoolwork. Again, however, limits may need to be considered. If districts add too many local standards or too much subject matter, teachers may not have time to teach the subject matter at a deep enough level or be able to determine which standards are the most important.

Should we develop standards in other course offerings?

Although virtually all states have developed standards in core academic subjects, many have not done so in other courses. In some instances, standards and curriculum frameworks for these other courses are available to teachers from their professional organizations and other sources. In other cases, the courses are locally grown.

Standards could be developed for vocational programs and physical education programs, for example. But whether the course at issue is sociology for high school students, Japanese for first-graders, or performing arts for middle schoolers, a school system may want to consider how far it wishes to go districtwide to determine what students should know and be able to do.

Should we have standards for other aspects of student achievement?

The focus of the discussion thus far has been on helping school boards identify effective standards for academic success. Again, as

local school officials seek to address their community's concept of student achievement, they may wish to consider how much emphasis should be placed on other areas of student learning, such as teamwork, civility, character development, moral principles, patriotism, or life skills. While some of these areas can involve academic knowledge, the development of these character traits will tend to evolve from classroom discussions or practices aimed at building awareness and habits, rather than from academic performance. Indeed, in today's high-stakes academic environment, the treatment of character issues may be diminished because such a commitment may be viewed as competing with class time for academics. In these areas, the district may choose to take leadership and develop specific standards or to leave the design of that aspect of their student achievement vision to the discretion of individual teachers and school building staff.

Some of these factors in student development may already be embodied in state or local academic standards. For example, a history or literature standard may call upon students to be able to present the moral or patriotic issues represented by the subject matter and relate them to contemporary times. Moreover, some interpersonal skills, such as the ability to communicate, may be more readily tied to academic standards than others, such as leadership or teamwork. Finally, school boards should recognize that unlike academic knowledge, standards in this area may not lend themselves to right answers, objective measures of performance, or clear evidence that students ultimately believe in or adopt the character attributes to which they are being exposed.

Placing Standards in Context

Well-conceived standards are essential in bringing a school system's vision of student achievement into reality. But the goal will not be reached unless equally thoughtful action is taken to implement the standards. To that end, curriculum should be designed to match the standards, in terms of both content and the level of rigor needed to produce the student performance outcomes desired. In turn, the instructional material and level of teaching needed to support the curriculum also must be brought into alignment. For example, different levels of difficulty in two works of literature can be viewed as meeting a reading standard that is based on "interpreting" meaning. Therefore, the

right choice between the two would be important, as would the choice between history texts that emphasize different events or present different levels of social analysis. A continuous commitment to staff development is also necessary so local educators will know how to design curriculum or use frameworks in a way that meets district standards, including being able to select appropriate course materials and knowing how to teach to the standards. In short, good standards must be followed by a good alignment of resources.

Time is another consideration that may need to be addressed. In Chapter One, we saw that developing "the educated student" can involve much more than academic study in core subjects. But activities such as practicing team building, working on projects, and doing other kinds of exercises can draw time away from classroom instruction aimed at reaching academic standards—especially as measured by a high-stakes test. Therefore, school leaders should be aware of how their student achievement goals and their core academic standards relate to one another and whether classroom time is an issue; if so, they need to make the priority decisions that best meet their objectives.

Conclusions for Local Policy Makers

The substantive development and review of standards is a technical function that requires knowing the academic subject matter and what students should be able to understand and do. Consequently, those activities belong in the hands of the superintendent and the experts that he or she designates. As policy makers, school boards have a different but pivotal leadership role. A board that focuses on standards as part of its overall student achievement plan can send a powerful message within the system and throughout the community that standards count. Further, as board members develop a common understanding of their district's standards, they can move in a goal-oriented and unified manner in performing their oversight and policy functions to evaluate progress and to align resources with the system's student achievement goals.

Externally, the board's public engagement activities can serve both to build the community's vision of student achievement and to test whether the standards that are developed reflect that vision. Likewise, a school board can play an important outreach role to engage the community to strengthen the public's understanding of the school system's

standards, including how parents and other stakeholders can use the standards to contribute to their children's success.

Further, school board members may want to involve their school district with the various entities responsible for developing state standards. They may want to advocate that state leaders include an appropriate representative of their school system on panels that develop or evaluate state standards, for example, or with the agencies that ensure that teacher training and certification programs are based on such standards.

Finally, school boards, working with superintendents, may also want to convene a process for the district to review the adequacy of current standards, including whether they meet the principles outlined earlier in this chapter. Working with the superintendent, the board can become involved in sponsoring workshops on what the state standards mean, how well prepared the district is to meet them, and what additional standards need to be developed to meet community expectations for a well-rounded, high-achieving student.

To fulfill their policy-making role, school board members can start by asking questions aimed at enhancing their own understanding of standards and how they can be used as a student achievement tool. The questions at the end of this chapter should help get school boards started.

KEY QUESTIONS

In addressing standards, the key work of school board members will center on asking the right policy questions to strengthen the quality of the district's standards and the use of resources needed to attain them (including the understanding and involvement of parents and other stakeholders). School board members may wish to discuss with their superintendent the benefit of establishing an agenda item or workshop to consider the following questions, as part of the district's larger student achievement plan:

Review of Current Standards

- When was the last time the school board and superintendent reviewed the district's standards and process for adopting standards?
- Are our district's standards aligned with our community's vision of student achievement?
- Are our district's standards rigorous, clear, specific, outcome-oriented, manageable in scope, and coordinated between grade levels and related subjects?
- What external comparisons are used to determine the adequacy of state and district standards, and how may they be improved upon to meet the school system's student achievement goals?

Consideration of New Standards

- To what extent, if any, should the state's core standards be locally enhanced or supplemented to meet high community expectations, rigorous special programs, or future needs that are not otherwise covered?
- Are there subject areas in which the district does not have standards and should?
- Are there skills or character attributes that are tied to the community's vision of student achievement that merit the development of standards at the district, school, or classroom level?

Teachers

- Do teachers know the standards? Do they base classroom activities on them? Do they know when they are teaching to the level of standards? How do we know?
- Do teachers have the content knowledge and pedagogical skills to support the results in student performance that the standards require?
- What support is available to teachers to learn the standards and how to use them?

Parents and the Public

- Are the standards available to and discussed with parents, the media, business leaders, and the public in general?
- Is the public consulted during the development and adoption of standards?
- Do the standards provide adequate guidance for parents to know what is expected of their child and how they may be able to direct their support at home?

SOURCES OF INFORMATION ABOUT STANDARDS

School board members can use the following resources to compare the content of their standards with those of various states, as well as the impact those state efforts are having on student achievement:

Achieve, Inc. *http://www.achieve.org*. Achieve is an independent, bipartisan, nonprofit organization formed in 1996 by governors and corporate leaders to advance high standards and rigorous testing. In addition to issuing publications, Achieve maintains a database of state standards by grade level and subject area that can help educators strengthen their own standards and improve the organization of their curriculum and instruction. At the request of a state, Achieve will benchmark that state's standards with those of other states and nations and report on how well they stack up.

Education Commission of the States (ECS) *http://www.ecs.org*. The Denver-based ECS provides state-by-state reports on standards that include links to the ratings given by the American Federation of Teachers, the Council for Basic Education, and the Fordham Foundation.

Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (McRel) *http://www.mcrel.org*. McRel is a private, nonprofit organization established to improve education through applied research and development. In addition to online materials that can be used to build understanding of standards, McRel maintains a database of standards by subject and grade. It also provides links to sources that can be used for curriculum planning.

National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) *http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard*. NAEP has been regularly conducting assessments in grades four, eight, and 12 of samples of the nation's students attending public and private schools since 1969. The assessments are conducted at least every two years and most frequently involve reading, writing, mathematics, and science. The results are published on a national basis, and most states participate in state reports, making state-by-state comparisons possible. Using NAEP results, educators can determine how well their students perform compared to a wider field; they can also gauge the rigor of their own state standards. Data are typically broken out on the basis of race, gender, and economic status. The reports also provide an analysis of the findings.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Final Piece
Assessment and Testing

In the early chapters of this publication, we saw the benefits that accrue when local school boards define student achievement by asking larger questions about their communities' vision of what it means to be an educated person. In so doing, they are likely to consider emerging global trends and more localized changes that are affecting the workplace, community values, and lifestyles, as well as other societal developments for which their educational system should be preparing their students. We also saw how a district can translate that vision into a concrete student achievement program involving academic subjects, specific skills, and character development through the effective development of standards.

But once a school system has defined student achievement and developed its program, how will it determine whether its students are, in fact, reaching the goals and vision that have been set for them? This chapter explores some of the major issues concerning assessment (gathering information and making judgments) and testing (how information is gathered—for example, a paper test to determine a student's knowledge of a subject).

In today's high-stakes testing environment, assessment is frequently equated with performance on state tests in specific subjects. But while student performance on those tests is indeed an important part of assessment, such tests do not necessarily constitute the entire picture. This is especially true where the school board has developed student achievement goals that are broader or more rigorous than the knowledge or skills tested on state exams. Unfortunately, even those districts that have put visionary and comprehensive student-achievement plans into place may find their efforts superseded and narrowed by the attention they give to "the test" as the sole means for assessing the school district.

The purpose of this chapter is to help local school boards determine how to assess the progress they are making in meeting their student achievement goals. The material is based on the premise that test scores and other measures of performance should be used as strategic tools for raising achievement—not the primary reason students and educators come to school every day.

Specifically, we will examine some key principles about assessments and address the pros and cons of high-stakes testing. Finally, we will consider the role of the local school board in assessment. For the most part, the discussion will involve policy questions and not the technical elements of testing or descriptions of specific standardized tests. For board members who are interested in such a discussion, a review of those more technical issues can be found in NSBA's publication *Raising the Bar: A School Board Primer for Student Achievement*.

As school board members read through this chapter, they are encouraged to consider what the district role should be, how the assessment function fits into their overall strategic-planning process, and how well their assessment program responds to the district's vision of student achievement.

Some Basic Principles of Assessment

Generally, the public's view of testing is equated with student performance on a high-profile standardized test. However, an effective assessment of whether the district is meeting its goals may involve other indicators of progress, some involving the direct judgment of student work, such as projects or essays, and others involving less-direct

measures, such as graduation rates or enrollment in Advanced Placement classes. Further, while a test score is a number, school board members and others should recognize that an assessment is a reasoned judgment about what that number means.

When the public isn't made aware of the intended purpose of a test, the scores may produce an inaccurate picture. When local educators and policy makers don't know the purpose of a test—or when they do know its purpose and misuse it anyway—they, too, are likely to present a mistaken view of achievement. More importantly, they may also develop strategies and commit resources that do not directly address their student achievement goals.

In order for school board members to use various assessment instruments to make effective policy decisions—and to keep their constituents well informed—they need to know the purpose and design of those tests. The following section identifies some key points to help board members understand what different tests are designed to do, what the results mean, and how the results can be used with other indicators to assess progress and build strategies for improvement.

The focus of much of what follows is on testing, particularly standardized testing. What distinguishes a standardized test from other tests is simply the conditions of administration and scoring. We should, at the outset, dispel the common misconception that standardized tests are all multiple choice. Actually any test administered to the same kind of students, under the same kind of conditions, designed to yield a score that is comparable for all test-takers is "standardized." For example, an essay test that employs the same question and is scored using a uniform set of criteria would be considered standardized.

Our focus on testing—especially standardized testing—is not to suggest that such tests are the best or the only way of assessing student achievement. Rather, greater treatment is being given to this aspect of the assessment process because the effective use of tests requires a clear understanding of their underlying properties. Armed with this knowledge, school board members can work more effectively with their superintendent to help guide the test selection process and the interpretation of results.

Factors to Consider in Using Specific Tests

School boards should consider the following observations as they look at assessment in their districts:

Different tests serve different purposes.

When the public thinks of tests, it usually equates the results with pass rates or some judgment of accountability. However, tests are designed for three very different purposes. Some tests are diagnostic (that is, they are used to determine what portion of the curriculum a student or class is or isn't learning). In other cases, tests are used for placement purposes (that is, to make decisions about a student's promotion or enrollment in special classes). At other times, tests are designed for accountability purposes (that is, to determine whether a school, student, or teacher is to be rewarded or penalized).

Tests also differ in terms of the questions they answer. Norm-referenced tests compare a student's performance with that of a nationwide sample of students from a previous year and answer the question: Where does the student fall in relation to other students in a particular subject area? Criterion-referenced tests answer a different question: Where does the student fall in relation to specific standards that have been established for that subject?

Unfortunately, tests that are designed for one purpose frequently are misused for another. For example, the content of a norm-referenced test and its degree of difficulty will reflect a range of questions selected by the test developer through a careful review of textbooks, the judgments of experts, and field-testing. The resulting scores will tell schools how well their students know that information compared to the sample norm. But if students don't perform well, the reason may be that their curriculum didn't cover the same subject matter as the test—not that they didn't master the material they were taught. And even if a student does perform well in comparison to the norm, the score won't reveal whether he or she knows enough about the subject to be proficient. Still, scores on norm-referenced tests are frequently used to judge schools and school systems on how well their students are achieving.

What's tested counts.

Regardless of which one of the three purposes a test is used for, the material that appears on the test will be what counts in day-to-day activities for both students and teachers, especially when high stakes are involved. Conversely, content that is not on the test will not receive the same level of attention. Therefore, school districts should consider how well the scope and content of the tests they use are aligned to their own standards and overall concept of achievement in specific subjects.

Form counts.

In essence, a test is evidence of what a student knows or is able to do. How the student is tested counts. That is, if students focus their class and homework time on writing essays and thinking about the larger meaning of historical events, they will be less likely to do well on a test designed to determine whether they have memorized specific facts. And, of course, the reverse will be true if students who have been drilled on events and dates are asked to comment expansively on the relationship of these events to the times or to social developments they weren't previously challenged to think about. Further, how students will be assessed (multiple choice, essays, projects, and so on) is likely to influence how teachers present the subject matter, how pupils learn to think about information and use it, and, ultimately, whether the test format supports the district's definition of student achievement.

Rigor counts.

Just as content and form count in determining what a test reveals about student achievement, in the case of tests designed to give information about a student's proficiency at a specific level (criterion-referenced tests), determining the appropriate cut scores for various levels of accomplishment is critical. Such tests should challenge students to demonstrate that they can perform at the level of understanding and ability that the standards require. While standard setting is usually a function of the state—often working with the testing company—in some districts, locally developed assessments supplement state standards, and in these cases, district authorities determine their own definitions for proficiency levels (for example, setting specific cut scores).

Although not technically regarded as contributing to the rigor of tests, what it takes for a student to pass or to be declared "proficient" also may be influenced by different degrees of test difficulty. For example, a multiple-choice exam that requires a high grade in the selection of straightforward answers to succinctly presented questions emphasizes a different kind of mastery than one that requires lower scores but involves a more complex set of questions or responses.

Hence, in using a test to assess student performance, school boards need to know how well the rigor of the test is matched to the rigor of the standards. It's also useful to ask whether the various factors that can cause the test to be challenging are the ones that are intended (for example, an emphasis on problem solving or detailed recall of facts).

Multiple-choice tests can be good and bad.

Critics argue that multiple-choice tests emphasize memorization, test-taking skills, and students' ability to select right answers rather than their ability to understand and use subject matter. However, multiple-choice tests can also be designed to emphasize higher-order thinking skills through both the complexity of the questions and the level of analysis or work required to develop the answer.

Others argue that multiple-choice tests may not be effective in diagnosing what students actually understand. These critics suggest, for example, that a machine-scored math exam probably won't reveal whether a student failed to understand some aspect of the problem or simply miscalculated. But there are a substantial number of machine-scored standardized diagnostic math (and reading) tests that can detect students' strengths and weaknesses. Further, although performance-based tests provide human scorers wit the opportunity to obtain diagnostic information through careful examination of students' performance on specific tasks, the small number of tasks (such as essays) that can be effectively administered limits the content that can be tested and, therefore, restricts their ability to diagnose students' strengths and weaknesses across the full curriculum.

In determining the suitability of machine- or code-scored multiple-choice tests, then, local educators should know what skills school officials want to measure, how well the questions are designed, and how the results will be used.

Standardized tests can be good and bad, too.

A standardized test asks the same questions of a broad range of students and, typically, is intended to be used over several years. The benefit of these instruments is that they allow districts to make comparative judgments about student achievement that they would not be able to make using tests designed by individual classroom teachers. For example, if a school district has a standardized test that is aligned with its academic standards, local educators can determine how well students are doing regardless of the varying grade scales individual teachers might use in evaluating student work or the rigor of the tests they design for their own classrooms.

Likewise, districts can use state and national tests to determine the adequacy of their own standards and tests or, in the case of the nationally based NAEP exam, to determine whether the state's standards (against which the school district is being measured) are sufficiently rigorous. Frequently, test makers provide additional information to enable an analysis of results, such as whether students are missing certain questions at a high rate. As such, standardized tests can help ensure that the core curriculum is being adequately taught—or at least identify when it isn't. Proponents also point out that standardized tests tend to be "fairer" than more subjective measures such as essays.

However, standardized tests are not free from criticism. Since they tend to use multiple-choice formats, they are subject to the criticism described in the previous section. Increasingly, test makers are adding short-essay questions as a way of having students show their ability to think about and use information. But, depending on subject matter, critics point out that short essays may not be an adequate demonstration of problem solving, analytical ability, or creative application of information. Critics also argue that broad-based standardized tests are more likely to be culturally biased against racial, ethnic, or language minorities. It should be noted, however, that the introduction of performance-based assessments in many states has not significantly reduced such bias, and the gaps among various subsets of test takers persist. Critics also contend that such tests force an undesirable narrowing of curriculum and a sameness in instruction that detracts from the diversity of interest and academic excitement that should exist in classrooms.

When school officials use standardized tests to determine whether their student achievement goals are being met, they need to determine whether the tests are suitable for the purpose intended.

Performance-based assessments provide additional information.

While multiple-choice tests may be adequate tools to determine a student's knowledge of vocabulary or rules of grammar, they are less useful in identifying a student's ability to use subject knowledge to write creatively or argue persuasively. Recognizing such limitations, school districts increasingly are becoming interested in performance-based assessments, in which students are asked to produce projects, essays, or other demonstrations of their understanding of subject matter or their ability to use their knowledge in real-world applications. In addition to serving as a way to evaluate students, performance-based assessments also can be a teaching tool to help students use information in a certain way and to help diagnose areas needing help that may not be apparent from a machine-scored test.

As attractive as essays and other performance-based assessments may be, however, they do have drawbacks:

1. The difficulty of developing objective criteria to evaluate student work;
2. The cost and difficulty of training graders across the school district (or state) to evaluate essays consistently and in a manner that reflects the district's standards;
3. The cost and time to score examinations compared to machine-scored tests;
4. The limit to the number of performance tasks that can be administered;
5. The role chance plays in determining the performance of individual examinees, as a student may have broad knowledge of a field but still lack sufficient knowledge to complete one or more specific tasks;
6. The need to develop new performance tasks each time the assessment is administered to prevent teachers and students from targeting specific parts of the curriculum that have been the focus of past assessments; and

7. Where new performance tasks are used each year, the difficulty in providing uniform administration and scoring to ensure that students achieve at the level of state and district standards.

Given these drawbacks, school systems may want to consider which subjects merit performance-based assessments and how those assessments will be used.

What Do Test Scores Mean?

When district test results are released, there is a tendency to make judgments on the basis of raw scores. By themselves, however, raw scores—especially districtwide scores—probably won't reveal much about what the results mean in terms of progress. Instead, district authorities should make use of information provided by test makers on how to interpret specific scores or ranges of scores. Additionally, in assessing achievement, there are various ways in which student data can be broken down to provide school officials with a more refined analysis as part of their overall effort to raise performance of all students in all schools.

The use of disaggregated data

The unit of analysis that is used in drawing comparisons is important. To be sure, school board members will want to know how the district as a whole is doing. But they also should be interested in knowing where their strongest and weakest schools are or how some categories of students (especially on the basis of gender, race, or socioeconomic status) are doing compared to other students overall or in specific subjects. Similarly, by disaggregating test data, school principals should have helpful information for diagnostic, accountability, and placement purposes. However, when subgroups are created through disaggregation, average scores may exhibit a greater tendency to fluctuate from one occasion to the next. This can be especially critical when interpreting changes in average scores for minority groups, since they are often based on small numbers of cases.

How comparisons are made

Scores for norm-referenced tests can be reported as status measures, growth measures, or both. Status measures—which include percentile

ranks—compare students' performance to that of a norm group on the same test, typically grade-level peers. These measures answer the question: How is the student doing relative to his or her peers? In the case of students who achieve at the 50th percentile, for example, about one-half of their peers scored higher, and about one-half scored lower. Growth measures—which include grade-level equivalents and scale scores—place students on a continuum of development, allowing educators to plot gains from year to year. For example, a student may score at the second-grade level in math before a new curriculum is introduced but at the third-grade level thereafter.

Often, people have difficulty using norm-referenced tests in decision making because they don't know how to use the scores properly. Consequently, they interpret scores in a way that seems intuitively correct but does not actually support the interpretation they try to make. A common error involves the comparison of status measures (that is, percentile ranks) from year to year to evaluate the performance of schools, teachers, or programs. In fact, such comparisons reveal nothing about effectiveness and only serve to obfuscate the decision-making process. Status measures reflect the combined influence of family, background, and years of prior schooling on student achievement. For that reason, comparisons of such scores for different student populations from one year to the next are likely to reflect these differences and obscure real differences in performance. (A. J. Nitko presents an informative treatment of this topic in his *Educational Assessment of Students*.)

Finally, school board members should recognize that while comparisons are useful for diagnostic and accountability purposes, they are no substitute for the basic question of whether a district is meeting its student achievement goals. In drawing achievement comparisons between students or classes, school officials also should consider the extent to which the information is intentionally or unintentionally used to engender competition and how competition may affect student motivation and the learning environment.

Sources of test scores variance that have nothing to do with achievement

Aside from "true" variation in test scores due to the individual differences in test takers, there are several sources of "error" variation. These include the influence of occasions or time (for example, tests

given at different times in the curriculum schedule from year to year); different content samples (test format); different scorers or raters; and different conditions of administration (for example, noisy or quiet room, comfortable or too cold or hot, and so on). The magnitude of such chance variation (called "standard error") is measured and reported by the test maker.

Where test scores do vary, small movements up or down should be expected from year to year and may prove to be statistically insignificant—a determination that is made by the test maker. But whether or not observed changes have educational significance cannot be determined by referring to a statistical test. That is a judgment call that must be made by local authorities, depending on the district's goals, the characteristics of its students, and other factors. Finally, it is probably more effective to identify long-term trends than to react to short-term oscillations in test performance.

Value-added assessments

In recent years, another form of comparison, called valued-added assessment, has been used to help determine how well classes or schools are contributing to student achievement. In this approach, students' test scores are compared, fall-to-spring or spring-to-spring, to measure their growth—or the "value added" to their education—as a result of being enrolled in that class or school. In drawing comparisons with other students, educators can use available statistical techniques that will factor out, or control for, the influence of out-of-school factors such as family income or a parent's education.

Multiple Assessments and Other Considerations

This chapter gives substantial treatment to standardized tests because of the high level of political and public attention provided to them, as well as the likelihood that they will be misinterpreted or misused. However, as indicated in the discussion of performance-based assessments, schools and school districts have other ways of measuring student achievement. At this point, school board members will want to ask themselves, What does the overall assessment program of our school system need to look like if we are going to accurately measure our progress in meeting the community's vision of student achievement?

The need for multiple assessments

A single test probably cannot be used for diagnostic, placement, and accountability purposes. Neither can it fully assess students in any one of those areas. As we have seen, standardized multiple-choice tests are limited in the range of student skills they can demonstrate. Other factors also enter the equation. For example, some students may be poor test takers because they have difficulty dealing with time pressure or certain test formats. Similarly, projects and essays are limited as means of objectively and efficiently comparing a large group of students.

As a result, many school districts prefer to use a variety of assessments that, taken together, will provide a more complete picture of what a student knows and is able to do. Not only can this approach be more fruitful in diagnosing a student's strengths and weaknesses, but it may be a fairer approach in making placement decisions that might involve retaining students or judging their qualifications for advanced classes.

Other indicators of achievement

In addition to tests, other indicators may be used to assess academic achievement at the district level. These indicators may include high school graduation rates; college enrollments; employer feedback; Advanced Placement enrollments; enrollments in higher-level math or science courses or in foreign language courses; participation in academically related extracurricular activities; completion of portfolios, such as districtwide literacy portfolios for early grades; the use of running records (another early literacy method); exhibitions such as senior projects; voluntary exams such as the PSAT or SAT; and grades or grade distributions. These indicators offer a wider view of how students are applying themselves academically.

Looking beyond academics, school districts can use a variety of indicators to measure student achievement. It may not be easy to test for a broad range of personal skills and attributes, such as teamwork, civility, honesty, volunteerism, and appreciation of the arts. But if factors such as these are important to the community, and are included in the school program, shouldn't the district assess how well students are being exposed to or involved in them?

Similarly, an assessment of achievement may also take into account such auxiliary measures as truancy, student safety, classroom disruptions, teen pregnancy rates, or drug use. While these factors are not a substitute for determining what students are actually learning, all have a direct bearing on student achievement, and all are tied to the community's thinking about student achievement and school system performance.

Finally, and importantly, it is necessary to have a plan for analyzing such indictors; for reporting results to parents, the board, and the community; and for taking action when results call for change. In some districts, such a plan is missing altogether or at least partially missing, even for standardized test results. Rather than focus on test scores alone, school boards should place greater emphasis on their evaluation and response functions.

Teaching to the test

Many educators criticize "teaching to the test" out of concern that it narrows the curriculum, focuses the classroom on the test, and favors test-taking skills over genuine learning. But what if a test is well aligned to the district's standards and the curriculum? What if it reflects the range of skills that students should possess? And what if it can be presented in a way that encourages learning? Proponents point out that by teaching to a good test, teachers can focus class time on achieving standards; moreover, diagnostic feedback will be available to identify areas of teaching and learning that require special attention. Here the question is not so much whether school districts can use tests as a pedagogical tool, but what happens when the test is also used to determine student placement, accountability, or some other high-stakes purpose. Will these other purposes be appropriate? Will they alter the way the test is used?

High-Stakes Testing

According to *Education Week's* report *Quality Counts 2002*, to date, 24 states have authorized high school exit exams to determine whether students graduate. In 17 of those states, the exams were in effect for the 2002 graduating class. Eight states, primarily from the same group, condition student promotion on performance on statewide tests or plan

to do so shortly. The stakes are rising for school districts as well. For example, under the 2002 revisions of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), all states will be required to identify failing schools—with intervention to follow—if they do not make adequate progress yearly. Under this system, what counts is whether adequate numbers of schools and subsets of their students (for example, racial groups or limited English speakers) are meeting state targets of academic performance, as distinguished from, say, competing rates of progress from one school to another. (The federal and state roles are discussed more extensively in Chapter Three.)

Given the consequences involved, the content and design of high-stakes tests can clearly drive what is taught, how it's taught, and what kind of feedback students (and teachers) receive. In other words, test performance can dominate the classroom. So are high-stakes tests good or bad? Are they a beneficial strategy to help a district meet its student achievement goals? This section will broadly examine the potential benefits and liabilities school board members may wish to consider in the use of high-stakes tests or in policy discussions with state leaders about such instruments.

The benefits of high-stakes testing

High-stakes tests have several attractive attributes that supporters argue will have a beneficial impact on student achievement. The principal benefits are summarized below:

- **Creating alignment.** If tests have serious personal consequences for school personnel, staff members have a powerful incentive to make sure students attain state standards. Specifically, proponents argue, teachers and principals will focus greater attention on the curriculum, the quality of instruction, the quality of instructional materials, and the amount of classroom time actually spent on academic learning.
- **Motivating students.** In the case of criterion-referenced tests that carry high stakes for the student, the pressure to perform will also motivate students to know what the standards mean and attach importance to achieving them. The pride of passing an important exam, together with the fear of failing it, can create the positive pressure needed to provide the drive, focus, and recognition of relevance involved in learning. Testing can become an even more powerful incentive for

many students when competition between individuals, classes, or schools is introduced, proponents of high-stakes test point out.

Although research studies can support these types of benefits, others raise strong cautions, such as the counterproductive motivational impact high-stakes testing can have on students—especially on poor or minority children who don't believe they can succeed, those who fail to see the relevance of education, or those whose culture, peers, and values don't reinforce success. Moreover, tests that have high stakes for the district but low stakes for the student (that is, the results do not count in the student's grade) are unlikely to have a positive impact on student motivation.

- **Providing constructive publicity.** Public opinion can be a powerful force to motivate schools to do better and to engage the community to support improvement. For example, in Florida, dramatic turnarounds occurred in the 78 schools that were given grades of "F" by the state for the 1998–99 school year. The public attention given to these schools rallied their teachers, school districts, and communities to the point that all 78 were taken off the so-called watch list by the next year.
- **Building public credibility.** When the state uses a test that is based on rigorous standards and involves real consequences, it sends a message throughout the community that education is being taken seriously. Given the universal nature of a state test, the community will know exactly where its students stand compared to the more subjective grading standards of individual teachers or schools. Thus, when students perform well or show improvement on publicly reported state tests, community confidence in the schools is likely to rise, along with the community's willingness to support the schools financially.
- **Closing the achievement gap.** A universal high-stakes test may also play a role in closing the achievement gap. When a test holds all students to the same standard, weak academic programs and poor performance among low-achieving students will become more visible. Tests may, therefore, be instrumental in revealing inequities in instruction or school resources, leading to more targeted efforts to close the gap. Social promotion and gratuitous high school diplomas may no longer be allowed to mask the acceptance of educational deficiencies that hold too many students back for their entire lives. Further,

high-stakes testing is likely to cause school officials to put their best teachers and more resources into their weakest schools. For example, in Fairfax County, Virginia, the state's Standards of Learning program, which ties school accreditation to 70 percent pass rates, was a major factor in launching the district's EXCEL program, which allocates more resources—such as technology and staff development—to weaker schools. Additionally, to attract and motivate good teachers, a three-point program reinforces progress at weaker schools by (1) paying their teachers bonuses when student performance rises; (2) paying bonuses to their teachers who earn certification from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards; and (3) allowing their principals to have first selection of new teachers.

Resource reallocation of this type is likely to increase academic achievement and, ultimately, economic opportunity among racial minorities, students with limited skills in English, students with disabilities, and students from lower economic backgrounds. According to *Dispelling the Myth*, a report from the Education Trust, there is evidence that "accountability systems with real consequences for adults," such as those involving high-stakes testing, are producing high achievement levels for students in high-poverty, high-minority schools. Additional support comes from North Carolina and Texas. In both, state testing is a prominent factor, and both states reported significant gains on their NAEP scores for minority students. Finally, in New York, state officials have reported that more children with disabilities are taking state tests and achieving at higher levels.

- **Other benefits.** In addition to these potential benefits, Gregory Cizek identifies several positive but unintended consequences: (1) more focused professional development; (2) more awareness of the accommodations required for learners with special needs; (3) increased knowledge about testing among educators; (4) increased collection and use of information; (5) more educational options for parents and students; (6) more development of accountability systems; (7) educators' increased knowledge of their disciplines; and (8) more scrutiny of tests themselves and increased quality of tests.

The liabilities of high-stakes tests

As promising as the benefits of high-stakes testing may appear, criticisms abound. The following paragraphs summarize the main concerns critics have about high-stakes testing:

- **Turning schools into test-prep centers.** Critics contend that high-stakes testing will encourage teachers and principals whose careers are on the line to teach to the test, thus narrowing the curriculum and the kind of class work students do. For example, case studies from Texas reveal that in some schools, academic subjects the state doesn't test have been squeezed out of the curriculum, along with the arts and physical education. In an article for *American School Board Journal*, Frederick Hess and Frederick Brigham confirm a similar effect in Virginia in reaction to that state's Standards of Learning. Further, case studies conducted by Linda McNeil at Rice University's Center for Education reveal that, when high-stakes tests are involved, too much class time is spent on test practice and test-taking skills rather that real education. McNeil notes one case in which a principal spent nearly his entire instructional budget on test-preparation booklets, a further illustration that test prep can replace the curriculum.
- **Destroying the joy of learning.** Still other critics worry that the pressure of high-stakes testing will destroy the joy of learning and the pleasure of going to school for students and teachers alike. Students will not value education as a goal, but will simply equate schoolwork with preparation for their next test. And in a high-pressure, high-stakes environment, too many students—especially those who are struggling—will not develop the commitment to lifelong learning that will be crucial in the fast-changing world of the 21st century. Moreover, research shows that students are more likely to develop a deeper understanding of subject matter if they have freedom to explore material in a nonthreatening environment, interacting with peers, working on projects, and simply playing with subject matter, than if they are exposed primarily to teaching methods aimed at passing a test. Critics also suggest that good teachers will leave the profession because their role as educators will be reduced to functionaries who implement prepackaged, scripted curriculum—especially in low-achieving schools.

- **Weakening standards.** Because the penalties for students and teachers are so high with high-stakes tests, the standards for defining success may ultimately—and ironically—be lowered, or more students may be exempted from having to attain them. The standards themselves may be watered down, or the "cut score" needed to pass the test may be dropped. Jay Herbert of Teachers College at Columbia University reported that New York temporarily created a "low pass" category for students who scored below the required passing score. Under this plan, local school districts would temporarily have the option of issuing local diplomas for students who scored above 55 percent on the state Regents' Exams, but below the 65 percent required to earn the state diploma.

  Generally, though, the concern over weakening standards has yet to materialize in a way that will affect most students. In addition to New York, other states have made adjustments, but school board leaders often view these as limited in the larger scheme of their state's standards program. For example, in response to weak performance on its rigorous Standards of Learning, Virginia made minor revisions to state history standards. Some states, like Texas, will allow students to graduate who fail the exit exam, provided they pass exams in core subjects that are at least as rigorous as the state exam. In Massachusetts, students who just miss the cut score (within the margin of test error) may appeal by bringing in other factors to justify their graduation. Other states have delayed implementation of their tests to allow the system to adjust. To date, most of these modifications, while important, are aimed less at altering the content of academic standards than at preventing political or legal challenges to the tests.
- **Increasing the chances of litigation.** Critics of high-stakes testing warn as well that the tests are likely to spawn litigation against other states and school districts. For example, students who believe their failure to pass a high-stakes test stems from a deficient education program will argue they are being further punished when a school district denies them a high school diploma and the employment opportunity that goes along with it. Likewise, students denied diplomas or promotion to the next grade level may seek legal redress if they are not given adequate notice of their failure or provided appro-

priate educational services to meet their needs. In fact, several states have already faced such suits, including Louisiana and Texas, both of which prevailed.

Legal challenges also may be made that the tests being used to determine school, career, and future opportunities are culturally biased, or, that specific students were not offered a realistic opportunity to take an alternative test to accommodate their English language limitations or their learning disabilities. In high-mobility areas, building-level and school district staff may argue that their careers are being wrongfully determined by the performance of students whose low achievement was the result of being enrolled elsewhere at the beginning of the school year or the cumulative impact of several failed years.

- **Widening the achievement gap.** While the pressure and competition of high-stakes testing may motivate some students, the reverse will be true for many others who are at risk of failure. For example, research shows that being retained in grade is the most prominent predictor of whether a student will drop out of school. Similarly, there is some evidence that lower-achieving high school seniors in Texas dropped out as the exit examinations approached. Indeed, under high-stakes testing, school officials might have a disincentive to keep low-achieving high school students in school—especially if these students can enroll in GED programs that don't use the same exit examination. The potential dropout problem becomes a long-term issue, since these students are less likely to enroll in postsecondary schools or training programs that can improve their economic opportunities.

Questions about High-Stakes Testing

How can we reconcile these benefits and liabilities? Do high-stakes tests measure, encourage, or ultimately raise student achievement? Board members may want to explore the following questions in approaching high-stakes testing in their school district:

How well is a high-stakes test matched with our district's concept of student achievement?

If a test involves a specific subject, it should reflect the knowledge, skills, and performance levels contained in the standards the school system has adopted for that subject. In other words, the school system should be comfortable with what the test is measuring, how it does the

measuring, and what it is excluding. Since what is tested counts, officials may want to consider whether to supplement standardized tests with local tests to assess student progress on portions of the curriculum, whole subjects, or various skills state tests don't otherwise cover. For example, is knowledge of local history, the arts, or vocational skills important enough to merit tests that will be used factors in determining promotion or graduation?

District authorities also have a responsibility for ensuring that students have adequate access to the curriculum being tested by high-stakes state assessment programs. Every major test maker publishes its "blueprint"—the subject areas, or domains, addressed and the number and level of items in each domain. District personnel should compare this blueprint with the curriculum and with state or district standards to determine how good the match is between what is taught and what is tested.

What other assessments can we use in determining whether a student is promoted or can graduate?

Students who are retained are more likely to drop out, and students who fail to earn a diploma are less likely to succeed in life. Therefore, given the stakes involved, most experts—including those who advocate high-stakes testing—agree that poor performance on one test should not be the sole determinant of a student's success or failure. In deciding whether to retain a student in grade, for example, a school district could consider the teacher's knowledge of the student, including performance on class tests, essays, and oral expression. Of course, the first step in establishing a program of alternative measures is to determine whether the district is empowered to apply such measures and what restrictions the state may impose on the number of students who may be promoted in this way or the types of measures that may be used. States may also determine that if a student doesn't pass the high school exit examination, the student will not be denied graduation if he has passed a certain number of state tests in individual subjects.

Is our high-stakes test part of a larger programmatic strategy to support student achievement?

On the other hand, a school system can approach high-stakes testing as a sink-or-swim event. Especially where promotion is involved, the district can put supplemental programs in place so that students have additional opportunities to pass. For districts to accomplish this objective, the tests will need to be taken and scored early enough so that districts can offer interventions such as after-school, weekend, or summer school programs to help boost scores. And districts may also want to retest students before the next school year.

Apart from being educationally beneficial to the child, this approach may also solve possible legal and social policy questions over whether high-stakes testing is leading racial minorities and low-income students to drop out or fail in disproportionate numbers. However, providing supplemental services has its own challenges. For school districts, the cost of supplemental programs and the need to report scores quickly are major problems. Other issues include transportation, the pressure on lower-income high school students to work after school or in the summer, and the need to motivate low-achieving students to show up for programs when other children are not in school.

Should the accountability dimension of high-stakes testing be phased in?

Since the 1970s, states have been careful to allow a substantial phase-in time when implementing high-stakes tests for graduation. Typically, these tests are offered early enough in the academic program to provide time for remediation and opportunities to retake the test.

Whenever a new high-stakes test varies from a district's standards, curriculum, or teaching practices, districts will need time to develop and purchase resources as well as train teachers and other staff members. Accordingly, it may take several years to phase in the accountability dimension of a particular test. As discussed in Chapter 3, districts can do this in several ways. However, ESEA establishes a broad timetable that states must follow in regard to achievement levels in English and mathematics. In those subjects, each state will designate failing schools by determining a minimum percentage of students or groups of students (for example, race or gender) who must pass the state test. States then will have to increase that percentage by equal

amounts each year (or group of years) so that 100 percent of students achieve state standards within 12 years.

High school students may need such phase-ins most, especially in the first few years of high-stakes exams. These older students may have a huge achievement gap to close—a gap that began in elementary school—but they won't have the exposure to high standards that younger students will now get in the earlier grades.

Do high-stakes tests accommodate children with special needs?

For the sake of the child—and for the school system's accountability—children with special needs should be accommodated on tests generally, but especially on high-stakes tests. For example, for students identified as having certain learning disabilities, their failure to perform well on a test may be more a function of time limits than knowledge.

For children who think better in their native language, a test in solving word problems in mathematics should not become a test of their use of English. Likewise, test questions should not presuppose knowledge about culture. For example, a reading comprehension test that assumes knowledge about what a piece of farm equipment looks like or what function a highway bypass serves is unlikely to have meaning for an urban student.

The School Board's Role in Assessment

A well-thought-out system of assessment is essential in gauging whether a community's vision of student achievement matches the reality the school district creates. As such, that assessment system should provide a reasoned and data-driven platform from which to develop strategies and to determine the right mix of resources for sustained improvement. Additionally, the assessment process holds the entire system—students, classroom teachers, principals, the superintendent, and the school board—accountable to itself and to the community at large.

Given the significance of the judgments that are involved in assessing student achievement, the resulting policy and budgetary decisions that will be made, and the high-profile relationships that assessments bear to the public interest, how can the school board not be involved? As school board members think about the importance of their governance role—

indeed their responsibility—in this area, they may wish to consider the Random House Unabridged Dictionary's definition of assessment: "to estimate officially the value of ... property ... as the basis of taxation."

If board members substitute the words "education" or "public schools" for the word "property," their responsibility becomes clear. Viewed this way, the school board's responsibility for assessment comes in two stages: first, determining the intrinsic value of education to the community (that is, initial vision setting), and second, determining whether the expected value is actually received.

In addressing their responsibilities, school boards may wish to discuss with their superintendent the benefit of having board/staff workshops designed to accomplish the following:

Develop a common understanding of student assessment and the role it currently plays in the system.

First, the school board and staff should have a common language and understanding of what assessment means, the various ways the district currently measures student achievement, and the specific purpose each measurement serves. The principles outlined earlier in this chapter can help guide policy discussions in this regard. For example, a school board might ask: How well does a particular test measure our standards in terms of its content, format, or rigor? Are we inappropriately using a test for accountability purposes that was designed specifically as a diagnostic tool? Does a particular test really reflect the level of learning and the kind of activity that we want to see in our classrooms?

It may also be useful to review how assessments are currently used in conjunction with education planning, resource allocation, and staff accountability.

Develop an assessment-gap analysis and strategy.

The school board and superintendent also may wish to identify any gap in the current assessment process. For example, given the community's broader vision for what it means to be educated, are there areas such as academic subjects, character development, the arts, or curriculum-related extracurricular activities that we do not assess but should? If we have high-stakes testing, does it foster an educational involvement consistent with our concept of what daily life in schools should be?

Armed with a common understanding about assessment, the district's approach to it, and any gaps that may exist, the school board will be better positioned to make strategic changes to sharpen the relationship between the district's assessment process and its student achievement goals. This may lead to the replacement or modification of current assessment tools, the addition of a broader range of measures, increased student participation in supplemental programs, and better communications with the public.

In developing a strategy, policy makers and the community may find it useful to have a briefing book that sets forth the varying purposes served by the district's assessment process, the kinds of tools used for each type of assessment used, and the role state tests play. Such a book might also include how the district uses its assessments, the most recent results, and key assessment dates. Treating this information as a unified and strategic whole will strengthen the relevance and utility of the assessments to the school board's month-to-month policy decisions on student achievement.

Engage the community around assessment.

As the elected and appointed representatives of the public, school board members are responsible for engaging the community around assessment. This function can include inviting public dialogue on how the community would like students and the system to be assessed and what concerns the community has with the current process. For example, do parents want students to be assessed around areas of character development? What are their perceptions about the meaning of specific tests and the impact they have on their students?

Given the relationship between high-profile test results and the budgetary needs of the district—as well as the accountability and credibility of teachers, schools, and the district as a whole—school boards should consider strategies for building better public understanding about their assessment process and specific tests. For example, do parents, the media, business leaders, and the community at large really know what state and district tests are intended to reveal or what variations in scores mean in relationship to student achievement? Likewise, what meaning do constituents attach to various state tests? Do they understand the purpose for which the tests were designed and how the

results should be interpreted or compared? Do parents know how to use individual results to support their own children's education? Does the public have examples of test questions showing the level of knowledge and skills students are expected to demonstrate, or does the school system simply publish scores and rankings?

Just as importantly, does the public know what the school system intends to do about the results on specific tests or broader assessments of achievement—regardless of how good or bad the news is?

Communicate with state policy makers.

While the ultimate responsibility for student achievement goals resides at the local level, the state is playing an increasingly prominent role in determining those goals and the rules of accountability, especially when high-stakes tests are involved. The result can be a disconnect between what local school officials and their communities want and what they must do to implement state policy. Frequently, state policy makers do not know the undesirable impact their testing program is having locally. Accordingly, school boards need to make certain that state legislators (and other state policy makers) have adequate knowledge of local student achievement goals in the communities they represent. Legislators should also know what local assessments are revealing and how the state assessment is supporting or misdirecting the local school system.

As in the case of engaging the community, school board communication with state policy makers about assessments should be based on a common understanding about the principles of assessment, the key tests involved, and the strategies the school system plans to use for its various measures of achievement.

Conclusions for Local Policy Makers

In effect, the assessment process answers the question: How well is what we're doing working? But the process is only as good as the tests and other indicators that are selected, how clearly the results are understood, and how well they are used as part of a larger student achievement plan.

School board members who know how to access student achievement in their school system are more likely to make effective decisions

to connect the way they make policy, establish budgetary priorities, and provide overall leadership to advance education in their communities.

KEY QUESTIONS

In assessing student achievement in their districts, the key work of school boards will be to define a policy role that will produce: (1) a thorough analysis and accounting of student progress consistent with local and state expectations; (2) a basis for effective board decision making; and (3) a constructive climate throughout the district for improvement. Further, school boards and their superintendents should discuss the effectiveness of the role the board currently plays and how it may be improved. The following questions identify some of the elements to consider:

Review of the Assessment Process

- Does the school board have a written plan for how student achievement will be assessed, what the key timetables are, how the assessment will be used, and how results will be reported to the community and staff?
- Does the school board make its own assessment of student achievement in the school system?
- Does the school board discuss how student achievement is assessed, what the priority indicators are, and what the most recent results show?
- Which tests and other indicators of student achievement do the school board use in its strategic-planning process? How are they used?

Assessment Resources

- Does the school board have reference materials containing the results from various assessments; key factors in understanding them (including the state assessments); explanations designed for parents, the media, and the general public; and a list of additional resources, such as Web sites, that the board can consult for more information?

Engaging the Community

- Does the school board engage the community to determine its assessment of our school system, individual schools, and specific programs, as well as the criteria the community uses to make these judgments?

- Do parents, the media, business leaders, and the public at large understand the district's assessment process and what the various measures mean?
- Does the public know how the assessment process fits into strategic plans for improvement?

Engaging State Policy Makers

- Does the school board engage state policy makers to discuss the relationship between state-level assessments and our community's vision of student achievement, its values, and our local standards?
- Does the school board discuss with state leaders the beneficial and detrimental effects that state assessments are having on students, the quality of their education programs, and the priorities in learning those assessments are creating?
- Do our state legislators know how our district assesses progress, how that assessment fits into our strategic-planning and accountability processes, and how well the state assessment is matched to those functions and the overall governance role of the school board?

GENERAL QUESTIONS

The quality of the judgments school boards make in assessing student achievement will be tied directly to their knowledge of the measurements they select and how well those measurements are used. This chapter outlined several core principles and factors that school boards should consider as part of their assessment role. The following questions are presented as a guide for board/staff discussions aimed at strengthening school board effectiveness in assessment:

Review of the School Board's Role

- Does the school board have a formal board/staff workshop to discuss how student achievement will be assessed, what the priority indicators will be, and what the most recent results show?
- Does the board develop its own formal assessment of student achievement?

- Does the board simply react to specific indicators as they are reported? Does the board develop a consensus assessment or does it proceed only on the basis of each board member's individual judgment?
- What is the process by which schools, the central office, and the school board perform their respective roles in assessing student achievement?
- How does the school board use assessments for the purpose of strategic planning, budget allocations, and public engagement?
- Are there gaps in the assessment program, such as areas of achievement that are important to the community but not covered, or areas in which the indicators used do not adequately address district goals?
- What range of measures are used, for what purposes are they used, how should the results of specific measures be interpreted, and how does assessment fit into the district's strategic plan to raise student achievement?

Data-Driven Assessments

- Does the board disaggregate data on the basis of race, gender, or ethnic group to determine the level of achievement being reached by key segments of our student enrollment? Does the board make comparisons within or among schools?
- Does the board evaluate the performance of classes, schools, and the district over time? Does the board review student performance at specific grade levels or by cohorts of students over time?
- Does the board compare classes, schools, and the district as a whole with others in a given year? Does the board compare their rate of progress over time with the rate of progress made by others over the same period of time? In making those comparisons, does the board consider nonschool factors such as variations in family income or education?
- Do professionals at the school level evaluate the performance of individual students during the school year and over time?

The Suitability of Various Assessments

- Are the tests the district uses aligned with our standards in terms of the content covered, the skills we want students to demonstrate, and the rigor or level of performance needed to meet our definition of student achievement?

Conclusion

Across the nation local policy makers, professional educators, and students are working harder and more effectively to raise student achievement. Given the current focus on scoring well on state tests, however, it is sometimes easy to lose sight of the larger purposes of education and the community's role in making that determination.

To help local policy makers keep the larger purposes of education in perspective, this publication addressed the broad question of what it means to be an educated student. In addition to academics, it looked at what we want children to be able to do with their knowledge, the development of cognitive skills, and issues of character and values that are so essential in the fast-changing high-tech world of the Information Age. To help school leaders think about what student achievement really means, we considered a variety of factors. For example, we examined what some great scholars have thought about the meaning of education in their time, as well as the paths respected futurists see our nation heading down as we prepare our children to succeed in the world of tomorrow. In addition, we looked at some special issues, such as the proficiency gap between districts' highest- and lowest-perform-

ing students and the option of contracting with private providers of educational services.

School boards can play a pivotal role by assuming leadership to engage their community to create a vision for what student achievement means and what the local schools must look like to advance achievement. Once parents, teachers, and students themselves have a clearer idea of where they are heading, they will be more likely to take charge of their education and pull together to reach their goals.

As central as creating a definition of student achievement may be, however, a plan of action is needed if a school district is to realize that vision of success. The efficacy of the plan will stand squarely on a well-thought-out set of standards. High-quality standards that are tied to the district's vision will form the foundation for the policy decisions school boards must make to align resources and strategies to reach the district's goals. That alignment will also provide an articulated basis for determining how school programs need to be assessed; give greater meaning to the results that are achieved; and bring clarity to what the school system and the students are being held accountable for doing.

Finally, we considered the various ways in which progress can be assessed. A significant portion of the discussion involved state testing, which is receiving increasing attention among education policy makers. Because test scores are measures on which policy judgments must be made, the publication sought to help school board members understand the function and limitation of the tests they use and how results can be interpreted or misinterpreted. The overarching principle involved is that the assessment process (which includes but is not limited to tests) is a tool for measuring how well the district's goal of developing educated students is being met. Assessment itself is not the ultimate goal, though that unfortunately can become the case when communities and school boards do not have their own vision of student achievement or do not adequately use standards to define the knowledge and skills students should possess.

In sum, the web of connections that link vision setting, standards, and assessment is strong. As school boards continue to strengthen their knowledge of the substance and function of each, they also will be able to strengthen their effectiveness as leaders for student achievement.

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Michael A. Resnick, associate executive director of the National School Boards Association (NSBA), is responsible for the association's advocacy activities—including public policy issues involving the advancement of student achievement and the governance role of the local school board. An attorney and former member of the Loudoun County, Virginia, School Board, he is the author of two related NSBA publications: *Communities Count: A School Board Guide to Public Engagement* and, with Gerald W. Bracey, *Raising the Bar: A School Board Primer on Student Achievement.*

About NSBA

The National School Boards Association is the nationwide advocacy organization for public school governance. NSBA's mission is to foster excellence and equity in public elementary and secondary education in the United States through local school board leadership. NSBA achieves its mission by amplifying the influence of school boards across the country in all public forums relevant to federal and national education issues, by representing the school board perspective before federal government agencies and with national organizations that affect education, and by providing vital information and services to Federation Members and school boards throughout the nation.

Founded in 1940, NSBA is a not-for-profit federation of state associations of school boards across the United States and the school boards of the District of Columbia, Guam, Hawaii, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

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